

**Schisms and Shimmers of Hope:  
Sector difference and the influence on children's learning**

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The period of time this thesis has been under construction has been a significant time of change in my life. Burying myself in writing this work has averted my attention from the anxieties that change can bring. I can now raise my eyes to bring into view and confront the uncertainties and opportunities the future holds.

## **Abstract**

Historically the early childhood and school education sectors in New Zealand have been viewed as different, since each is positioned separately in terms of Government policy and legislation. Children and families experience sector difference during transition from early childhood to school. National and international research studies point to a view of transition to school as a period of transformative change. Transitioning experiences have the capacity to transform positively and negatively according to a child's reaction to, and their ability to cope in, a new setting.

Research studies suggest that sectors' transitioning practices need to focus on providing children and families with support as they adapt to the new learning environment. Environmental and relationship familiarity have dominated the direction of the support provided by teachers to date. Less attention has been given to supporting children's continuity of learning. The fact that the two sectors operate under distinctively different curricula suggests the existence of difference in approaches to teaching and learning. This research study set out to learn about the influence of sector difference on children's learning during transition to school and to gain insight into the ways in which teachers might support children's continuity of learning.

The study was set in the professional development context of a group of early childhood and primary teachers participating together with a focus on early literacy teaching and learning. The group was to look closely at the

learning experiences of a group of transitioning children, while discussing and learning about curriculum practices in each sector. Constructivist perspectives underpinned this study as meaning and understandings emerged through participant conversations and interactions. The study draws together teacher insights and understandings with children's experiences to propose ways that sector complementarity could more effectively support children's continuity of learning.

The questions raised in this study point to a need for practitioner research studies to be undertaken, where teachers can investigate local solutions as they strive to improve the ways they support transitioning children and families/whānau and progress implementation of the *New Zealand Curriculum* (2007).

## Chapter one: Introduction

The early childhood and school sectors in New Zealand have a history of difference in curriculum practices. This research study set out to learn about the influence of sector difference on children's learning during transition to school. The intention was to gain insight into the ways in which children experience learning continuity or discontinuity as they navigate their way from one learning context to another.

The study was set in a professional development context where a group of early childhood and primary teachers participated together with a focus on early literacy teaching and learning. The group looked closely at the learning experiences of a group of transitioning children while discussing and learning about curriculum practices in each sector. A goal of the professional development was to investigate teaching theory and practice in the two sectors so that teachers could use this knowledge to strengthen teaching in both sectors and develop ways to make the transition a positive experience for children and their families.

Current research literature points to the need for more focused attention to support children and families during the period of transition to school. This is generally discussed in terms of gaining familiarity with the rules, responsibilities and relationships in the new environment. However recent literature has also raised questions about how curriculum continuity or discontinuity influences children's learning during transitions. This study aimed to contribute to developing understandings of children's learning



continuity as they move between two sectors positioned in a context of curriculum difference.

The study context provided a group of early childhood and primary teachers with the opportunity to gain knowledge and understanding of the prior-to-school and school learning experiences of a group of children as they transitioned between sectors. The domain area of literacy learning was selected as a focus for exploring learning continuity. Participants were involved in learning about each other's curriculum and approaches to literacy teaching and learning during regular meetings across a twelve-month period.

At the beginning of the study participating teachers did not necessarily share a common pedagogy in relation to early literacy. Recent approaches to literacy in education have evolved in response to increased attention at a national level, with new theories and research insights influencing each sector's policy and practices. An implication of this was that teachers from each sector, as well as within sectors, may have had different ways of thinking about literacy and therefore, children's learning continuity experiences could differ.

The study drew on what the participating teachers perceived to contribute to difference in sector practices, and how these differences played out as influences on continuity of children's literacy learning during transition to school. The following questions shaped the research study:

In what ways might sector difference influence children's learning during transition from early childhood to school? What can be learnt about continuity of children's learning through cross-sector collaboration?

My interest in exploring the influence of sector difference on continuity of children's learning has evolved from my work as a professional development provider. Opportunities for teachers from both sectors to meet and discuss curricula, teaching and learning are scarce under current Ministry of Education professional development contracts. In my role as an early childhood professional development facilitator I have become aware of the increasing numbers of primary teachers seeking advice and support from their early childhood colleagues as they begin to develop their understandings of the *New Zealand Curriculum 2007*. Over the past eight years I have increasingly become involved in working with groups of primary and early childhood teachers to enhance children's, and their family's, transition to school experiences.

Through my prior cross-sector professional development experiences I have developed a firm belief that the two sectors (primary and early childhood) need to view themselves as complementary rather than as 'different' or oppositional. Both sectors are working towards the same end – children's education. I believe that when both groups of teachers are knowledgeable about the goals, aspirations and 'ways' of teaching of the other, they are in a stronger position to provide families and children with the support needed to ensure the move from one environment to another

can be a positive experience. Children can leave early childhood as capable and confident young learners and continue on their learning pathway with limited interruption to learning as they enter school.

It was my intention, through the professional development context of this study, to explore these beliefs. I held a dual role in this study, that of the researcher and also that of a professional development facilitator. I was to listen to and challenge teachers during discussions about sector-specific teaching and learning practices, in order to reflect on my assumption that increased teacher knowledge and understandings would in some way improve transition experiences for children. I was hopeful that teachers would demonstrate change in practices and that continuity of literacy learning would become visible for the children we were to focus on during their transition to school. My approach to research and the methodologies I adopted are described in chapter three of this report.

The title of this report emerged during analysis of the rich qualitative data collected over the period of the study. In chapter four the data collected about the children is described and analysed. These data revealed aspects of sector difference that children needed to negotiate their way through as they strove to become members of their new learning environments. These are identified and discussed in chapter five as schisms that hold influence on children's experiences. The choice of the term schism is reflective of the way children can experience a rupture or break in learning during transition. It also reflects the traditional view of division between sectors.

Teacher discussion frequently referred to this traditional division but looked forward to the potential of the *New Zealand Curriculum (2007)* to overcome many of the frustrations they experienced when attempting to address the impact of sector difference. In chapter six I discuss the implications of the schisms children experienced by pointing to the way teachers from both sectors can assume responsibility for engaging in practices to reduce the effect of children negotiating the schisms independently.

## Chapter two: Literature review

### **Introduction**

The New Zealand education context includes a non-compulsory early childhood sector for children from birth to six years of age, followed by a compulsory schooling sector. From birth, children are curious and capable learners. Learning begins in the home with new contexts, such as early childhood and school, experienced as children grow and develop. In New Zealand children typically begin school on or near to their fifth birthday. During their first five years children move between and adapt to these learning contexts, building on their prior experiences and learning inclinations.

Research studies exploring transition to school suggest that children's learning can be negatively impacted when significant discontinuity is experienced. Adapting to new relationships, rules and responsibilities can be demanding for the young learner. Teachers are urged to increase attention to supporting transitioning children and their learning continuity.

Provision for learning continuity assumes knowledge of the child's prior learning, where they have come from and what they have experienced in prior learning contexts. This proves problematic for teachers who are positioned separately in either the early childhood or primary sectors. These sectors traditionally have a limited relationship as each has separate teacher training provision, operates under different Government policy, legislation and curriculum, and is frequently separated by physical

location. As a result the teaching and learning context of each sector can prove unfamiliar to the other and interfere with understandings of children's learning continuity.

In this chapter sector difference is explored by revisiting curriculum development of the early childhood and primary sectors in New Zealand. Transition to school and literacy literature is scoped to provide the contextual background to this study.

### **Sector difference - a schism**

Within educational circles in New Zealand there is a growing interest in building a sense of community between early childhood and primary sectors. The need for collaborative relationships between these education sectors is signaled in *Pathways to the Future: Nga Huarahi Arataki* – a 10-year strategic plan for early childhood education (ECE) (Ministry of Education, 2002) within the goal “to promote coherence of education between birth and eight years” (p.17). The strategic plan describes the vision for collaborative relationships in 2012. “There are close links between ECE and schools. Teachers from both regularly meet to discuss curriculum linkages, children's learning needs (including special education needs) and how best to manage transition from ECE to school” (p.17). Prior experience in facilitating professional development with teachers from both sectors would suggest there is a lot of work to be done before this vision becomes a reality.

The early childhood and school sectors were positioned separately in New Zealand's educational landscape when this study began. A potentially significant difference is that the primary sector was situated within the compulsory education sector and early childhood was not (this situation remains unchanged today). Accordingly, each sector has over the years journeyed a very separate and different developmental pathway. Mutch (2003) has explained how the political and social context, during the development of sector-specific curriculum documents, influenced this separate development. The compulsory education sector received greater public attention than did the early childhood sector.

### *The development of curriculum*

Development of the *New Zealand Curriculum Framework* (Ministry of Education, 1993) came about in answer to the need for a national, compulsory school curriculum that was responsive to rapid social and economic change and major reforms occurring throughout the state sector at the time. Changes in educational administration and perspectives on education were occurring, with the existing compulsory school curriculum coming under strong critique, particularly from the business sector. The influence of this was apparent in the foreword to the New Zealand Curriculum policy document (1993) where Maris O'Rourke, the Secretary for Education at the time, explained:

Today, New Zealand faces many significant challenges. If we wish to progress as a nation, and to enjoy a healthy prosperity

in today's and tomorrow's competitive world economy, our education system must adapt to meet these challenges. (p.1)

*Te Whāriki; He Whāriki Matauranga mo nga Mokopuna o Aotearoa:*

Early Childhood Curriculum (*Te Whāriki*) (Ministry of Education, 1996), on the other hand, was developed relatively untouched by the scrutiny and influence of the economically driven agenda of the time (Mutch, 2003). Mutch suggests this 'hands off' approach stemmed from a lack of understanding about learning and teaching for very young children, as traditional attitudes about the place of women prevailed in the business world. Another view would suggest that attention to the compulsory sector curriculum development consumed the time of those people in influence. Working together to develop understandings of the early childhood sector, in order to effectively participate alongside the formidable early childhood leaders of the time, was not readily or eagerly embraced.

Who was involved in writing the two curriculum documents and how they went about it, differed significantly. *Te Whāriki* (Ministry of Education, 1996) was developed with Margaret Carr and Helen May as lead writers, facilitating and co-ordinating wide consultation amongst the diverse early childhood sector of the time. People at the chalk face of early education were given 'voice' to contribute to a curriculum document that would encapsulate the values, beliefs, and vision for young children's education in Aotearoa, New Zealand. As a teacher at that time I recall a tense resistance to notions of 'falling into line' with the



compulsory school curriculum. The early childhood curriculum was not to be a watered down version of school curriculum. As Mutch (ibid) explains; “*Te Whāriki* was able to be shaped by the political and social goals of the women’s movement and, more specifically, the early childhood community” (p.113). The collaborative approach to development resulted in the early childhood sector having a sense of ownership of the final document.

### *Fragmented approach*

The approach to developing the school curriculum differed. In 1993 the Ministry of Education released the *New Zealand Curriculum Framework: Te Anga Marautanga o Aotearoa* as the official policy document for teaching, learning and assessment in New Zealand schools. This policy document was not mandated but signalled the impending development of a series of supporting national curriculum statements. In the ensuing decade these statements were produced by groups of experts within each of the learning areas. Seven essential learning area statements were launched and mandated at different times between 1992 and 2000. This fragmented approach to developing curriculum statements may have contributed to fragmentation in the way curriculum became enacted in schools.

Teachers in the field were introduced to the statements as they were launched through planned programmes of Ministry of Education-funded

professional development. Through these programmes teachers were supported to ‘take ownership’ (O’Rourke, 1993) of statements produced by the experts. In this way the curriculum was imposed on teachers in the compulsory sector as teachers, schools and boards of trustees were also assigned responsibility for satisfying the requirements and expectations of the documents.

### *Conceptual frameworks*

A result of the separate nature of development is that the two curriculum documents hold different theoretical emphases and resulting expectations of teachers in each sector. The theoretical framework of *Te Whāriki* (Ministry of Education, 1996) is influenced by Vygotskian sociocultural theory (Smith, 2000, p.65) in which emphasis is placed on encouraging an orientation towards learning; it is process oriented. *The New Zealand Curriculum Framework: Te Anga Marautanga o Aotearoa* (Ministry of Education, 1993) has an orientation toward achievement or outcomes; a product orientation. In a comparison of the discourses contained in *Te Whāriki* and *The New Zealand Curriculum Framework*, Mutch (2003) discusses the ideological and theoretical perspectives inherent in the documents as contributing to difference between the sectors.

*Theoretical perspectives*

The difference in writers' perspectives during development of the different curriculum documents influenced the resulting conceptual frameworks of each document and now proves to be one of the fundamental challenges to the continuing separate nature of the early childhood and primary sectors (Peters, 2005b). The New Zealand curriculum statements, presented in traditional subject areas and skills, reflected developmental or individualistic perspectives by framing student achievement around prescribed levels. The history of early childhood pre *Te Whāriki* (Ministry of Education, 1996) aligned to this view of learning as the sector was firmly grounded in developmentally appropriate practice (Bredekamp, 1987). In contrast, *Te Whāriki* introduced an integrated and holistic curriculum based on co-constructivist perspectives. This curriculum discusses the unpredictability of young children's learning. Although the influence of developmental perspectives continues to be visible in the practice of many current early childhood teachers, the sector has, over the past thirteen years, actively progressed its practices to reflect socio-cultural theories inherent in *Te Whāriki*. *Te Whāriki* has shifted early childhood practice from an over-reliance on one theoretical view of teaching and learning.

Sector specific curriculum has led to teachers from each sector working within different paradigms, one predominantly influenced by socio-cultural theories and the other developmental. The two paradigms

contribute different views on what it means to teach and, in turn, what it means to learn.

The influence of the difference in conceptual frameworks is particularly evident in planning, assessment and evaluation practices adopted by each sector which in turn, is visible in the practice of teaching. This difference has been identified and discussed in an Education Review Office (2000) report that explored the use of assessment to improve early literacy and numeracy programmes in early childhood and primary education. In this report the difference in what is assessed and how it is assessed in each sector is attributed to the difference in sector- specific curriculum goals and purposes where the focus shifts from learning dispositions to a focus on achievement outcomes.

*A new connectedness – shimmers of hope*

At the time this study was undertaken the compulsory sector was in a period of curriculum change. Between 2004 and 2006 a review of New Zealand's compulsory education sector curriculum took place, driven by the need to meet the changing demands of education resulting from increasing economic and social change. The resulting document *The New Zealand Curriculum: Draft for consultation 2006* (Ministry Of Education, 2006) was published and distributed six months prior to beginning this research study. Primary teachers participating in the professional development cluster group for this study had some familiarity with this

document as schools had involvement in the consultation process. The release of the final document *The New Zealand Curriculum* (Ministry Of Education, 2007) occurred during the course of this study and the participating primary teachers were involved in beginning to explore the implications of curriculum implementation within their schools.

*The New Zealand Curriculum* (Ministry of Education, 2007) has the potential to open dialogue amongst teachers about continuity in curriculum (Carr, 2006; Peters, 2005). This document makes connections with the early childhood curriculum whereas the previous document, *The New Zealand Curriculum Framework: Te Anga Marautanga o Aotearoa* (Ministry of Education, 1993) overlooked this. *The New Zealand Curriculum* (Ministry of Education, 2007) recognises *Te Whāriki* (Ministry of Education, 1996) as providing a foundation for lifelong learning and identifies how the strands of the early childhood curriculum correspond to the newly introduced key competencies.

The inclusion of key competencies in the *New Zealand Curriculum* (Ministry of Education, 2007) indicates a key shift in theoretical influence on the curriculum. Understandings of key competency learning draw on socio-cultural perspectives as evidenced in the introductory statements in the document, for example: “opportunities to develop the competencies occur in social contexts; the competencies continue to develop over time, shaped by interactions with people, places, ideas, and

things” (p.12). Peters (2005) and Carr (2006) suggest ways in which the introduction of key competencies offers a tool for developing links and forging new continuity between the sectors. They have written about how the key competencies of the *New Zealand Curriculum* (Ministry of Education, 2007) provide a natural link between the strands of the early childhood and school curriculums. The introduction of the *New Zealand Curriculum* (ibid) offers opportunity to bridge the existing schism between sectors as it signals a shift in theoretical underpinnings that align with those of *Te Whāriki* (Ministry of Education, 1996).

### *Socio-cultural view of literacy learning*

The shift toward socio-cultural understandings of teaching and learning, as contained in the *New Zealand Curriculum* (Ministry of Education, 2007) held implications for the early literacy teaching and learning professional development provided in this research study. A socio-cultural view of literacy learning sees children as active and competent literacy learners from birth (Wells, 2003). Children are born into literate societies and become literate according to the situations in which they experience literacy and the kinds of literacy used in those situations.

Wells (ibid) draws on the socio-cultural theoretical perspectives of Vygotsky, a psychologist, and Halliday, a linguist, to discuss the development of the abstract nature of written language and highlights the need to ensure that children are given guidance and assistance in carrying

out those parts of an activity they are unable to do on their own, and that such activities need to be perceived by children as both challenging and personally meaningful.

This is most likely to occur when activities are carried out in situations of collaboration with the teacher or other children, in which the new, synoptic mode of construing experience is related to the more familiar, dynamic mode through talk that moves back and forth between the two modes, building bridges between them. (Wells, 2003, p.45)

This socio-cultural view of literacy learning raises questions about congruencies in children's literacy experiences between home, early childhood and school. Ashton et al. (2008) have written about the increasing importance of congruence between the values and experiences of homes and families in fostering children's learning. They signal the potential disruption to learning that can occur when the values, goals and practices of families and schools are significantly different. The relationship between families and early childhood and school was explored in Ashton et al's Australian study. Their reported findings revealed no evidence of "a continuum of ideas, philosophies and experiences between the early childhood years and school" (p.11).

In a recent New Zealand study exploring continuity of children's literacy learning at the time of transition to school, Timperley et al. (2003) recommend the provision of more complementarities between settings in order to optimize children's learning.

The task of optimising children's development and learning across the two settings is probably best achieved if teachers in both settings include, in their professional roles, responsibility for offering complementary activities so that children recognise strategies acquired in the early childhood setting can be applied at school. (p.33)

The current separate nature of the two sectors, as has been discussed previously, could prove problematic for achieving complementary activities across settings. Provision of such complementarity between sectors assumes teachers know about the pedagogy and practices in each other's sector. Looking to studies that have explored transition to school provides insight as to why Timperley's (ibid) suggestion is worthy of attention and why it can prove problematic for teachers.

### **Transition to school**

Increasing interest in transition to school is evidenced in the raft of national and international research studies exploring children's transition to school experiences. In New Zealand, increased interest in transition to school came to the fore following the findings of the fourth stage of the Competent Children project (Wylie, 2001). This longitudinal study began by following a group of five hundred children from around the age of five. The fourth stage reported on these children at the age of ten. One of the findings was that children's transition experiences appeared to hold an enduring effect as there was a correlation between those experiencing a less than smooth transition and their competencies scores at the age of ten.

Children who took a while to settle at school, or who were matter of fact (lukewarm) about school when they first started



at age 5, had lower scores at age 10 than children who had started their school careers with enthusiasm, or who had been unhappy at first. Perhaps open unhappiness gives clear signals for additional adult intervention and support at the time when it is needed. (p.12)

Wylie's study signalled a need to pay closer attention to how children make the transition from one sector to the other. Subsequent studies have explored this by attempting to identify factors of continuity or discontinuity in order to minimise any adverse effects of transition to school on children.

In a review of international studies Yeboah (2002) identified some disagreement among researchers about the adverse effects on children of transition to school experiences, but reported an overall agreement that transition to school is perceived as one of the major challenges children face in their early childhood years. Yeboah (ibid) deduced from the literature that transition is generally difficult for children and that the factors promoting or enhancing a smooth and successful transition must be identified and emphasised.

In a study interviewing 197 children in their first year of schooling in Australia, Margetts (1999) looked to identify the factors which promote a smooth transition to school. The variables identified included gender, age, home language, prior attendance at preschool services, presence of a familiar playmate, and the number of transition activities experienced.

In another Australian study Dockett and Perry (2001) investigated the perceptions and expectations of children, parents and teachers about transition to school over a three year period. While this study identified a range of variables similar to Margetts' study, Dockett and Perry emphasised positive and responsive relationships as vital to successful transitions. They suggest that "the way it [transition] is managed sets the stage not only for children's success at school, but also their response to future transitions" (p.1). A key result of their study was that what children considered important varied considerably from what parents and educators considered important. Dockett and Perry (ibid) argue for promoting transition programmes that focus on relationships and collaboration by including the views and perspectives of children.

#### *New Zealand context*

The New Zealand transition to school context differs markedly from that of other countries. Children begin school on, or near to their fifth birthday as opposed to beginning school in a cohort at the start or mid year as is the case in most other countries. Children commonly enter the class as the sole 'new person'. This places additional demands on teachers who are constantly introducing and supporting new children and families to the culture of the school. Classroom practices need to constantly adapt to the capabilities and competencies of the newcomer to the class.

Peters (2000) undertook a doctoral study exploring the transition experiences of a group of children, their families and teachers in response to issues related to the complexity of transition to school in New Zealand . The study involved observation of 114 new entrant children who transitioned into one school from three contributing kindergartens. Seven case study children were interviewed as the main child participants. Their parents were interviewed along with a further sixteen parents of other children. Three new entrant and three early childhood teachers participated as well as the Principal, Assistant Principal, Secretary and a Board of Trustees representative from the school.

Peters' data revealed recurrent themes on issues of continuity from the children's, parents' and teachers' perspectives. All children experienced the transition differently and yet all identified the main discontinuity in their experience as less freedom of choice at school compared to kindergarten. This type of discontinuity was a source of stress for some while for others it was a source of delight in learning new things. The discontinuity did not necessarily have long-term consequences. Peters (2000) suggests that the amount of support and scaffolding the child received throughout the transition process appeared to be more important than the precise nature of the discontinuities that were faced (p.21). This finding aligns with Dockett and Perry's (2001) call for transition practices to emphasise relationships and collaboration, as the transition experience itself is complex and multi-faceted.

*Transition defined*

One of the useful outcomes of the transition literature is that a shared understanding of the concept of transition to school is developing. Rather than thinking of transition to school as the ‘big step’ a child makes when starting school, with the child’s readiness for school the main consideration, it is now more widely accepted as a period of change with increased emphasis on educational settings being responsive and adaptable to the uniqueness of the child. This is the definition of transition to school adopted in this research study. The period of change straddles the movement from one community (early childhood) to becoming an established member of another (school). An established member of a community will display confidence in relationships, expectations and environments. The period of transition, therefore, will differ according to the time each individual needs to adapt to, and negotiate, the changes they experience. Within this definition teachers from both sectors have a responsibility to focus on managing the change process with children and families.

*Collaboration and relationships*

Developing collaboration and relationships between early childhood and primary teachers was a key goal of this study. I sought to provide opportunity for participating teachers to develop shared knowledge and understanding of a group of transitioning children as young literacy learners. Unlike Peters (2000), and Dockett and Perry’s (2001) studies, my

study did not set out to directly include the children's voices through interviews. It was my intention to explore how transitions might be enhanced by following children's experiences through the eyes of teachers as they collaborated to share information about transitioning children while, at the same time, developing shared understandings about early literacy teaching and learning. The issue of sector difference was to be central to my study as participating teachers would be confronted by these differences during discussions and visits to each other's environments.

Peters (2005) draws attention to the need to consider difference between sectors when looking to make links between school and prior to school learning.

It is important that any attempt to make links between learning in early childhood services and school takes account of the systemic differences between sectors, and the ways in which these can work against forming connections. (p.14)

Systemic sector differences have been discussed earlier in this report. The two sectors have historically operated under different curriculum conceptual frameworks with differing theoretical perspectives. An outcome of this situation is that teachers can hold different views on what it means to teach and, in turn, what it means to learn. This difference can impede communication between the sectors.

In previous writing (Wright, 2005) I have explored the development of cross-sector relationships and discussed how the language used by

teachers from each sector can create barriers to developing such relationships. Teachers may use similar terminology when talking about educational practice but each sector holds a different interpretation as framed within the paradigm of the sector's curriculum. For example, when speaking of learning, primary teachers may think about what is acquired by the learner, early childhood teachers tend to think of how knowledge/development is being created through a learner's participation. These differences in discourse are not easily overcome. The "development of relationships that contribute to professional respect and meaningful dialogue requires commitment to on-going (facilitated) contact over the longer term" (Wright, 2005, p.191).

#### *Focus on continuity*

The research focus of this study aligned with recent transition research where interest has shifted to look more closely at issues of the continuity of children's learning. Research contributing to knowledge of this concept includes projects that have explored it from children's, teachers' and parents' perspectives.

Descriptions of the concept of continuity can include ideas around sameness, consistency, flow, and connectedness. McNaughton (2002) draws on a number of New Zealand studies and contributes an understanding of continuity as "the matching of expertise that children have in their everyday activities outside school with the sorts of entry skills they need to engage effectively in classroom activities" (p.20).

McNaughton (ibid) draws on the work of Bruner to describe this approach as a “‘meeting of minds’, where the teacher’s concern is ‘how do I reach the children,’ and the children’s concern is, ‘what’s she trying to get at?’” (p.8). McNaughton’s work suggests that teachers hold a critical role in providing continuity for children in classroom practice. Teachers need to be concerned with knowing where the learner is at and teaching in a manner that enables the learner to bring their ways of learning, and their knowledge of and ways with words, into the classroom activities (p.31). To know the child in such a way requires primary teachers to seek insights from families/whanāu, the child and their prior-to-school early childhood setting. In the current educational context of difference between sectors it is questionable as to whether learning from the early childhood setting is recognised as relevant by primary teachers.

The impact of sector difference in teacher priorities for children’s learning has been written about by Timperley et al. (2003). As part of a larger project aimed at strengthening education by developing better links between the schools and their contributing early childhood settings, 20 school and 27 early childhood teachers were surveyed for their beliefs about assisting children to make a successful transition to school. A key finding was that, despite a commitment to collaborate, early childhood and primary teachers had very different expectations of each other and were dissatisfied with current transition arrangements.

The different expectations teachers expressed were in terms of what tasks early childhood settings should undertake in facilitating the transition for children. The answers given by teachers provided an indication of the prior to school learning that each sector believed important. Early childhood identified ‘develop literacy/numeracy skills/ provide literacy/numeracy activities’ as the most frequently nominated category whereas school identified ‘establish routines and learn how to behave’. Similar differences were evident in the second and third nominated categories. Primary selected ‘develop familiarity with equipment’ and ‘socialise with others/social skills’ whereas ‘arranging visits’ and ‘establish routines and learn how to behave’ were selected by early childhood. This latter category was the closest to being valued by both sectors. Timperley et al.’s study highlighted the issue of how difference in teacher expectations around children’s learning resulted in dissatisfaction with transition arrangements between settings.

Of interest was the fact that the surveyed teachers rated their relationship with the early childhood or school setting most of their children transitioned between as ‘very strong’ or ‘moderate’. Seventy-three percent of early childhood and seventy-nine percent of primary teachers had visited each other. Timperley et al. discussed how the reported strong relationships and frequent visits had been insufficient in resolving differences in teacher expectations and suggested that this was because “strong relationships were defined in terms of frequency in contact, not the quality of that



contact” (p.37). Timperley et al. proposed sharing information on individual children at the time of transition as the type of quality contact between sectors that could make a difference to transition arrangements, and lead to improving continuity for children. In Timperley’s study, half of the early childhood settings had sent information to the school via the parents; however only three of the 20 school teachers had received this information. Some primary teachers said they did not request this information as they believed it served little purpose. This attitude is not isolated to Timperley’s study. In the Education Review Office report (2000) *Early Literacy and Numeracy*, only one of 95 primary teachers said that she found the early childhood records useful.

Reliance on the sharing of information about children between sectors, as a way to resolve differences in teacher expectations and to contribute to continuity, is problematic. Not only is the sharing process unreliable, but the documented assessment practices in early childhood are also significantly different to those adopted in schools. Therefore, the information contained in children’s early childhood profile books may not be the type of information that primary teachers are looking for, or may not be fully understood without face-to-face conversations with early childhood teachers. Prerequisite to relying on documented information from early childhood to school is the need to develop shared understandings about sector-specific curriculum and assessment practices.

Further investigation into the ways to support the development of this cross-sector knowledge and understanding is warranted. The approach to developing cross-sector collaboration planned for in the professional development context of this research study was to involve teachers in sharing and discussing children's literacy assessment information as well as providing opportunity to observe and discuss practice in each other's environment.

### **Sector responsibility for continuity**

As previously discussed, studies exploring issues around children's continuity of learning and transition to school have highlighted that teachers in both sectors have a responsibility to more effectively support children's transitions. Different authors tend to assign certain responsibilities to one sector or the other. Views range from the suggestion that teachers in early childhood need to align practices with primary (Phillips, 2002; Timperley, 2003), to primary needing to align with early childhood (Brostrom, 2007), to the view that difference between sectors can be beneficial in promoting children's learning (Peters, 2003).

#### *Alignment of sectors*

The approach proposed by Timperley et al. (2003), as discussed earlier, was to develop early childhood practices so that they more closely aligned with those used in school. They offered a recommendation for

“the pedagogy of early childhood to be structured to provide a range of language, literacy, and numeracy activities, thereby creating channels for the development of those skills and understandings that increase engagement in classroom activities” (p.38). Similarly, in a study into raising levels of literacy achievement in low decile schools entitled *Picking up the Pace* (Phillips, 2002), researchers set out “within the guidelines of *Te Whāriki*, to enhance early childhood literacy activities so that they more closely complemented similar activities at school” (p.15). In both Timperley and Phillips’ work the approach to continuity involved bringing early childhood practice more in line with school.

Brostrom (2007) offers an alternative approach to easing the transition for children through continuity - that of introducing play in early schooling as a transitory activity. Transitory play is a structured approach to play based on Vygostkian principles of play influencing children’s higher mental functions or metacognitive abilities. Brostrom proposes that a play-based approach to early schooling could hold double benefits. “On the one hand, play enables children to achieve new competencies which help to make a successful transition; on the other hand, play can be a bridging tool to school” (p.19).

The two views point to a need for one sector or the other to make change in pedagogical practice. However both views identify a need to enhance continuity in learning for children; they each involve one sector in

making the fundamental change to teaching practice. This is where tensions lie. As discussed earlier, the difference in conceptual curriculum frameworks underpins the difference in practices in each sector. The suggestion to make change in pedagogical practice creates a tension for teachers who can be protective of their sector's theoretical beliefs. Laying responsibility for changing practice on one sector or the other is unhelpful as it immediately creates a division. Early childhood has been historically resistant to notions of being responsible for preparing children for the more formal learning of school, while the primary sector is resistant to adopting the continuation of an early childhood play-based approach.

### *Sharing responsibility*

Peters' (2003) research described how children can ably adapt to the different contexts when transitioning to school. She offers the alternative view that difference between the two sectors can be viewed positively as change in learning contexts can promote development. "New experiences such as transition can therefore be seen as actually promoting development, and school does not have to be the same as prior to school contexts, provided the child receives appropriate support to negotiate the changes" (p.16).

I hold the view that both sectors share responsibility for supporting children's transition to school. Consultation and collaboration are

necessary pre-requisites for making change to teaching and learning practices. Change need not be assigned to one sector or the other. Decisions about transitional practices need to be made within local communities. I seek joint responsibility, based on socio-cultural principles, where members have the opportunity to influence the activity, emerging knowledge and understandings of the community.

### **Literacy teaching and learning**

Literacy learning has been promoted as a national focus within every sector of education in New Zealand by Ministry of Education policy and initiatives since the release of a cross-sector and coordinated long-term 'National Literacy Strategy' in 1998 (Ministry of Education, 1999). This strategy came about in response to concerns raised through international assessment data that revealed wide disparities in achievement for specific groups of students in New Zealand, namely Māori and Pasifika students. The National Literacy Strategy aimed to rectify this issue. The professional support provided through the strategy focused on improving teacher understanding of literacy pedagogy and its application in the classroom (Ministry of Education, 2004).

In the past, understandings of literacy have been defined too narrowly, by many in education, as the ability to read and write (Limbrick, 2005). Limbrick (ibid) calls for definitions and explanations of literacy to include visual, audio, spatial and gestural elements as well as the written form.

This debate centers on the understanding that written language, or texts, are contextually bound, and as such are interpreted as meaning systems in a specific context. To be literate involves developing the skills, knowledge, capabilities and attitudes necessary to be able to be a reader, writer, interpreter, speaker, viewer and presenter. Oral language underpins this early literacy learning. In *Learning through talk: Oral language in years 1 to 3* (Ministry of Education, 2009), oral language is promoted as something that “can and should be taught” in school. Oral language “enables us to become literate, to think, and to communicate across all curriculum areas” (p.7).

#### *Current literacy knowledge in primary*

The national focus on promoting literacy learning has seen the primary sector having access to ongoing specific professional development through the Literacy Professional Iterations made to the Development Project (Ministry of Education, 2004). It is likely that the primary teachers participating in this study were well versed with literacy teaching and learning knowledge and understandings.

#### *Current literacy knowledge in Early Childhood*

The early childhood sector has been less well catered for in terms of professional development. In my own experience, as a facilitator in Ministry-funded early childhood professional development contracts, in the

past five years only three out of approximately 450 centres identified literacy as a centre-wide development focus. With this insight I deduce that in early childhood teachers are strongly dependant on their pre-service teacher education for knowledge and understanding about early literacy teaching and learning. My years of experience in the early childhood sector suggest that, with a large number of different teacher training providers coupled with the fact that the early childhood profession is characterised by a high number of long serving teachers, it is unlikely that all early childhood teachers have up-to-date knowledge of literacy teaching and learning.

The limited interest in developing literacy teaching and learning in the early childhood sector could be explained by the way the sector has needed to be focused on other aspects of curriculum implementation such as assessment practices. According to Nuttall (2005), early childhood teachers have been relatively focused on the practical implications of *Te Whāriki*, the early childhood curriculum, since the launch of the first draft in 1993 and the final document in 1996. Implementation of *Te Whāriki* demanded that teachers develop programme planning and assessment practices, as prior to this time there was no such requirement for early childhood settings. As Nuttall observed:

The implementation of *Te Whāriki* in the 1990's became somewhat derailed. Instead, early childhood educators during this decade were preoccupied with two aspects of early childhood provision that were critical to the implementation of *Te Whāriki*, but which were not focused on curriculum provision as such: achieving regulatory compliance, and learning about assessment practices. (p.17)

With the release of the *Kei Tua o te Pae*, (Carr, Lee & Jones, 2004) early childhood exemplar resource in 2005, professional development has retained a focus on supporting teachers to develop assessment practices. With the emphasis on developing assessment practices, attention to clear assessment of learning such as literacy has tended to be overlooked.

The current national emphasis on literacy learning (Ministry of Education, 1994, 2004) has resulted in early childhood teachers facing pressure to develop children's literacy skills and abilities. Timperley et al's (2003) research into raising student achievement in literacy identified a weakness in literacy teaching and learning within early childhood. The limited uptake to date of literacy-focused professional development would support this view. Timperley (ibid) recommended that the pedagogy of early childhood be more aligned to that of school. The suggestion to 'structure' early childhood pedagogy holds some concern for the sector. The current literacy pressure coupled with a weakness in literacy domain knowledge may contribute toward the early childhood sector adopting literacy teaching practices that are inconsistent with the empowering and holistic view of learning provided within *Te Whāriki* (Ministry of Education, 1996).

*Te Whāriki* (ibid) recognizes that young children learn early literacy within purposeful and meaningful social contexts. The context that supports early learning is different from the context for later learning in the school setting. *Te Whāriki* states that:



Children from birth through to eight years of age have developmental needs and capabilities that differ from those in any subsequent time in their lives. The early childhood curriculum is therefore different in its approach from the curriculum for older children. (p.20)

Hamer and Adams (2002) alerted the sector in 2002 to the need to become “informed literacy professionals” (p.9) in order to avert an impending threat to early childhood pedagogy. The increased national focus on the development of an educated and literate workforce had the potential to place pressure on the early childhood sector “to help young children acquire the prerequisite reading and writing skills necessary for school success” (p.9). As Hamer and Adams (2002) explained: “This ‘push down’ effect will no doubt place strains on early childhood educators, who now, more than ever, will need to be able to justify why and how they incorporate literacy into their environments” (p.9). The ‘push down’ effect could potentially have a detrimental impact on children’s dispositional learning in the early childhood sector. The Education Review Office (2000) cautions against the introduction of “academic work” into the early childhood sector as the approaches likely to be taken by teachers could be counterproductive in the long term.

The risk of early instruction in beginning reading skills is that the amount of drill and practice required for success at an early age will undermine children’s dispositions to be readers. It is clearly not useful to learn skills if, in the process of acquiring them, the disposition to use them is lost. (p.6)

Clearly, the early childhood sector needs to turn attention to strengthening literacy pedagogy so that children’s literacy capabilities are

developed within early childhood programmes guided by the Te Whāriki Principles.

### **Looking ahead**

The historical landscape of curriculum development in New Zealand has left a legacy of difference between early childhood and primary. The potential to overcome this, as presented by the *New Zealand Curriculum* (Ministry of Education, 2007), has yet to be realized.

My study was driven by the need to identify ways in which sectors might work together in order to ensure children's learning is uninterrupted as they make the transition from early childhood to school. In this study the impact of cross-sector collaboration on children's learning continuity is explored. My interest is to discover whether combined sector professional development may overcome the historically separate nature of the sectors. Participating teachers focused on the literacy learning of children as they transition to school. Listening to teachers as they share and discuss children's literacy learning from early childhood to school provides insight into how sector practices may enhance or hinder continued learning.

## Chapter three: Methodologies and sources

### of data

#### **Introduction**

This chapter presents the methodologies and methods adopted in this research study. The study spanned a 16-month period from May 2007 to September 2008. It followed the development and involvement of a group of teachers in a year-long cross-sector cluster and concluded with an evaluative meeting between myself and my co-facilitator from the primary sector. Research interest focused on a group of six children's literacy learning experiences as they moved from early childhood to school and the ways teachers discussed and acted on their knowledge of children's experiences. One of the activities of this group involved sharing assessment data and knowledge of the children during their last months at early childhood through to their first six months at school.

The professional development context of the study and approach to research is described in this chapter. The selection of research participants and data collection approaches is explained. Socio-cultural theories underpin the development of the frame for analysis and the overall structure of this thesis report.

### **Cross-sector professional development**

In 2005 I worked in partnership with a local Ministry of Education Literacy Development Officer to establish a cross-sector professional development cluster. This group ran for eighteen months from mid 2005 to the end of 2006.

In 2007 we established a second cluster group that became the focus for this research study. My role in the professional development was to guide teachers during investigations into literacy teaching and learning, to facilitate activities and experiences in which they contributed their own expertise and understandings and to participate in the learning of the group by contributing my own knowledge, experience and queries. I believe that learners, whether child or adult, possess expertise, ability and knowledge to contribute to the learning process; they are “rich in potential, strong, powerful, and competent” (Malaguzzi, 1993. p10).

### **Theoretical orientation**

Socio-cultural theory and understandings of learning guided the approach to professional development and the research methodology. My prior experience in professional development and research studies influenced the design and implementation of the study. I drew on ideas from the practitioner and interpretative research paradigms as appropriate for the research context, which was to be a collaborative approach to collective knowledge.

*Practitioner inquiry*

Cochran-Smith and Donnell (2006) propose the term *practitioner inquiry* to refer to the array of educational research genres where the practitioner is a researcher, the professional context is the research site and practice itself is the focus of the study (p.503). Educational research is concerned with the improvement of teaching and learning. This goal aligned with the intent of the professional development context of the study, where the research site was the professional development group and the practice in focus was literacy teaching and learning during transition to school.

I participated within this study as a facilitator, observer and learner, as well as researcher for the study. These roles overlapped in much the way Mattson and Kemis (2007) describe one form of practitioner inquiry, praxis-related research, where the researcher is part of the social networks and relations, and as such, has opportunity to gain knowledge from within. It is an interactive process. In this study the central purpose was to learn from the experiences of a group of children through participant teacher inquiry and discussion. A goal of this collaboration was for individuals to enhance or change their thinking and practice in relation to transitioning children and families. Praxis-related research proved appropriate as it is seen to influence change for individuals as well as patterns of activity or practice (Mattson & Kemis, 2007).

Collaboration is a key feature of practitioner inquiry. In this study collaboration was central to the purpose of bringing the group of participants together. The participants were the knowers, learners and researchers (Cochran-Smith & Donnell, 2006) as collaboration within the group was to construct knowledge and understandings about practice. The participant teachers were positioned as collaborative researchers in this study as their perspectives and practices, as sources of data, were collaboratively analysed at meetings and represented in the text of this report.

Smith and Donnell (ibid) and Goodfellow and Hedges (2007) draw attention to common critiques of practitioner research. Issues of rigour, transparency and accountability are frequently questioned when practitioner inquiry is not viewed as 'research'. Goodfellow and Hedges argue that teacher inquiry can be defined as research when notions of systematic inquiry underpin the process. This report describes the systematic approach of the study, including the socio-cultural theoretical stance adopted, the literature that informed the study, and the methodology and ethical considerations. Opening up the findings for scrutiny occurred throughout the research process as participants, as a professional community, collaboratively critiqued and theorised the findings. As author of the formally written report, I was to add another layer to the analysis and discussion of the group's inquiry. The final report document provides an avenue for external scrutiny.

## **A learning community**

The approach to facilitating teacher learning in this study was grounded in socio-cultural theories, in which learners are involved in co-constructing meaning and understandings as active participants in their own learning. As Rogoff (1994) describes: “The idea of a community of learners is based on the premise that learning occurs as people participate in shared endeavours with others, with all playing active but often asymmetrical roles in socio-cultural activity” (p. 209). Rogoff argues that, as an instructional model, a community of learners is based on a philosophy different from that of a transmission or acquisition model of learning. In the transmission model the teacher is viewed as the expert and the learner as an empty vessel; the acquisition model views the learner as discovering knowledge through their own endeavours with the teacher having a passive role so as not to interfere with the process. In a community of learners model, learning occurs where participants are actively involved in meaningful social activity (Rogoff, 1990, 1994; Wenger, Mc Dermott & Snyder, 1998). The activity reflects the learning that is valued by the community itself. Through social participation, each person gains not only knowledge but also understandings of the purpose that knowledge serves. In other words the learning is meaningful and purposeful.

The concept of a learning community is derived from socio-cultural constructivist views of learning. Various authors have used differing

words to describe understandings and interpretations of communities in action. For example, Wenger et al. (1998) use the term community of practice and Rogoff (2003), community of learners. They draw from socio-cultural theories discussed by people like Lev Vygotsky, John Dewey, and Urie Bronfenbrenner who share the belief that learning is fundamentally a social activity. “There can be no development of an isolated individual, for each individual is interconnected with other people” (Dewey, 2004. p70).

The differing terminology used to describe learning in communities is predominantly a theoretical debate. The factor common to all is the reference to learning through participation in a social context. In the social context of the teachers participating in this study, teacher learning-opportunities occurred as they came together to explore teaching and learning practices in more depth. The professional development focus of early literacy learning provided a common purpose and a defined ‘learning domain’ to engage with, in much the same way as Wenger et al (1998) explains that a community of practice has three key fundamental characteristics – a social system and set of relationships (community), a domain (area of knowledge) and a focus on practice. Wenger (2005) describe communities of practice as “groups of people who share a concern or a passion for something they do and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly” (p.7).



An understanding that underpins a socio-cultural perspective on learning is that individuals and culture mutually constitute. As Rogoff (2003) explains: “In the emerging sociocultural perspective, culture is not an entity that influences individuals. Instead, people contribute to the creation of cultural processes and cultural processes contribute to the creation of people” (p.51).

It could be argued that the two groups of people participating, early childhood and primary, each come from an established culture that is representative of their sector. This study provided opportunity for these two cultures to ‘rub up’ against each other. My interest needed to take notice of these occasions in order to explore the influence of culture, relationships and practice in each sector.

### *Learning conversations*

A key activity of the cluster group of teachers was to engage in learning conversations with each other. Through conversation participants engage in inter-subjectivity where shared meanings and understandings develop. Berk and Winsler (1995) describe the meaning of the term inter-subjectivity: “A concept introduced by Newson and Newson (1975), inter-subjectivity refers to the process whereby two participants who begin a task with a different understanding arrive at a shared understanding” (p. 27).

In Rogoff's (2003) words these are occasions "when mutual understandings occur between people in interaction: it cannot be attributed to one person or another" (p. 285).

Engaging people in inter-subjectivity through conversation is an important quality of effective professional development. This is supported by Annan, Lai and Robinson (2003) who discuss engaging teachers in what they describe as 'learning talk' as an effective strategy in changing teacher beliefs and practice. "Learning talk is therefore talk about teaching which analyses, evaluates, and/or challenges the impact of teaching practices on student learning outcomes, and/or creates more effective practices to replace ineffective ones" (p.32).

In the professional development context conversations are enriched through the introduction of literature and theoretical perspectives. Learning conversations involve teachers in collective praxis whereby they are informed by educational theory and the perspectives of others, but his/her decisions are grounded in current reality (Mayo, 2003). Ongoing conversations provide opportunity for teachers to explore their own practice in relation to that of others. Assumptions and beliefs are questioned as new theories emerge.

Taking notice of these questioning times in the context of discussion amongst teachers from different education sectors could reveal

differences in knowledge and understandings. These differences may provide insight into how schisms between sectors influence children as they move from one to the other. The choice of the term schism in this report reflects the way that children can experience a rupture or break in learning during transition. It also reflects the traditional view of division between sectors.

### **Collaboration and co-facilitation**

The notion of collaboration has important implications at all levels of this research study. Firstly, collaboration underpinned the co-facilitation approach to the delivery of professional development. Prior to working together with the first cluster group, my co-facilitator and I acknowledged what we saw as the benefits of co-facilitation:

- the professional leadership voice of both sectors would be present;
- we would be contributing current sector-specific knowledge and understandings;
- we would be equipped to clarify and discuss misconceptions or inaccurate understandings that may arise; and
- we would be learning about each other's sector with and alongside our participants.

We were both strongly of the opinion that we wanted the cross-sector clusters to involve a collaborative approach to teacher learning. John-Steiner (2000) draws on Vygotskian and feminist theories to explain how,

in collaborative relationships, we learn from each other and engage in mutual appropriation.

In the collaborative context, the development is realised in a number of ways. A long-term collaboration can be a mirror for each partner: a chance to understand one's habits, styles, working methods, and beliefs through comparison and contrast with one's collaborator. In Vygotskian terms, partners create zones of proximal development for each other. (p.3)

A goal of the joint professional development cluster was for teachers to think about their own practices in relation to the other sector, and make their own decisions about enhancements or changes to practice as they considered the experiences of transitioning children and families. Mayo (2003) envisioned this type of teacher learning and coined the term *collective praxis* to describe it. Collective praxis provided a useful descriptor of the intention we held for strengthening collaborative relationships between participants. Mayo suggests that:

Through collective praxis teachers are engaged in conversations which call upon educational theory of all shapes and forms in order to address local issues. Then, teachers would be acting pragmatically within their local settings, yet at the same time, their expertise as practitioners would be informing the emergence of new educational theory. (p.15)

The professional development cluster was designed to bring differing perspectives together with ongoing discussion around early literacy teaching and learning and transitioning children. The outcomes of this approach would become evident in teacher conversation and practice, which could be viewed as the emergence of new theory. Our investigations into early literacy teaching and learning would avoid taking a judgmental view of whether either sector held the right or wrong

approach as our interest was in discovering how practices might change when the voice of both sectors contributed to the construction of a collective knowledge. Capturing the complexity of participant conversation and practice in a way that would allow me to explore the emergence of understandings became an important component of my research design.

## **Research participants**

### *The facilitators*

The cluster group was co-facilitated by myself, an early childhood professional development facilitator, and Liz (a pseudonym), a Literacy Development Officer from the local Ministry of Education office. Literacy Development Officers were appointed by the Ministry of Education in 2004 as a part of the national Literacy and Numeracy strategy that aimed to strengthen literacy and numeracy components of teaching practice in order to raise the achievement of all students (Ministry of Education, 1994, 2004). Literacy Development Officers work with schools to review literacy goals, analyse achievement data as a basis for future literacy practice decisions, and broker professional support for schools. Liz's involvement in this study was described by her as motivated by her professional responsibility as well as her personal interest in strengthening a connectedness in literacy learning between the two sectors.

Representation of both sectors in facilitation helped to avoid one sector's voice dominating discussions or the direction of the professional development. We ensured the 'voice' of each sector was represented in leading the group so that all teacher participants would feel supported to share and critique their practices.

### *Selection of teachers*

Teacher participants were invited to join the professional development cluster. Developing collaborative relationships between participants was a key goal for the cluster group and this influenced the decision to select participants from within local communities in the hope that relationships would continue beyond the life of the cluster group. My co-facilitator contacted the principals of three schools within neighboring suburbs to elicit their interest. Once these schools confirmed their participation I approached early childhood settings in close proximity to the schools.

A key activity of the cluster group was to follow children's literacy learning from the early childhood setting through to school. To participate in the cluster the early childhood settings needed to have at least two children who would be moving to one of the participating schools within four months after the group's first meeting. Of five settings approached, Busy Kindergarten, Town and Beach early childhood centres (pseudonyms) fitted the criteria and displayed keen

enthusiasm to participate in the professional development cluster that was to be named the Enhancing Early Literacy Learning group (EELL).

At least two teachers from each setting were expected to commit to the professional development cluster group. However, due to the difficulty of replacing two out of three teachers to attend meetings from Busy kindergarten, coupled with problems they faced accessing qualified relieving teachers, the group agreed that Busy kindergarten be represented by one teacher. In total, the group consisted of six primary and five early childhood teachers.

In the final two months of the study two primary teachers withdrew from the professional development for personal reasons, leaving one teacher participating from each of Busy and Town schools (pseudonyms) (see Table 1).

Each teacher participant was provided with an information sheet describing the research project and requesting his or her participation. The teachers could participate in the EELL group without being a research participant, though all teachers chose to participate and completed a consent form. Participant and setting names have been altered in this report to ensure anonymity.

*Selection of children and parents*

Six children and one parent of each child participated in the research study. Between the first and second cluster meetings each early childhood setting selected two children due to transition to one of the schools as focus children for the professional development study.

The early childhood teachers approached the children's parents for consent to share information about the child at cluster meetings. They also asked the parent's permission for their own and their child's participation as focus children for the research study. Parents were provided with a research information sheet. The parents of all six children completed consent forms for their child's participation as well as for their own participation.

Children were given pseudonyms. Table 1. lists the children, the early childhood setting they attended and the school they transitioned to.

*Table 1. Focus children*

<b>Name</b>	<b>EC setting attended</b>	<b>School attended</b>
Ash	Town Early Learning Centre	'Other' school
Michelle	Busy Kindergarten	Busy school
Ruby	Beach Childcare Centre	Beach school
Tom	Town Early Learning Centre	Town school
Jane	Beach Childcare Centre	Beach school
Sally	Busy Kindergarten	Busy school

One child, Ash, moved to a school other than those participating in the cluster. However, his new teacher contributed assessment data so that we could continue to follow his literacy experiences. This teacher did not participate in cluster meetings.



Ethical approval for this research study was gained from the Human Ethics Committee of the University of Canterbury College of Education.

### **Qualitative methods**

This study drew on qualitative research tools to provide a wealth of detailed data for analysis and interpretation. A qualitative approach has its foundations in ethnography that emerges from a constructionist paradigm. As has been described, the context of this study involved research within a social setting where conversations and perspectives were of great interest to the research inquiry. I participated with the group of teachers as a learner, facilitator and researcher. In order to investigate emerging ideas and perspectives related to the research questions, I was to immerse myself in the activity of the group rather than sit 'outside' as an observer. Bogden and Biklen (2007) describe how qualitative research involves interacting with subjects in a natural, unobtrusive and non-threatening manner so as to reduce the 'observer effect'. "Since qualitative researchers are interested in how people act and think in their own settings, they attempt to "blend into the woodwork," or to act so the activities that occur in their presence do not differ significantly from those that occur in their absence" (p. 39).

To ensure that I captured the complexity and breadth of the social milieu and relationships within the research context as research data, I employed

multiple qualitative data collection methods. Brennan (2006) discusses her own attempts to use socio-cultural approaches in educational research and warns that “failing to capture the complexity of a socio-cultural approach in research practices will affect our understandings of how individuals, societies, and cultures evolve and develop” (p.17).

Data were collected from different sources including materials that I produced myself, and that which others had created. I documented participant observation and field notes (both descriptive and reflective), and tape-recorded and transcribed conversation to learn about and develop an understanding of the context in which participants made sense of and enacted their lives. This data was not simply background data as through conversation people describe and explain their perspectives. Analysis of this data involves making a concerted effort to understand various points of view (Bogden & Biklen, 2007, p.245).

I collected documents, such as those generated at cluster meetings, teacher’s and parent’s notes, assessment of the children documented by teachers along with work samples produced by the children. This documentation was to capture participant thinking and interpretation and to glean insight into the ways authors of the documents think about and act in their world (Bogden and Biklen, 2007, p.133).

Data collection methods were not constrained by predetermined categories of analysis. Analysis and interpretation of data was an ongoing process that

consisted of making sense out of the collected data by developing ideas, searching for patterns and major themes. These research methods are described and explained in the following section of this report.

### **Sources of data**

Data collection began on 28<sup>th</sup> May 2007 at the first planning meeting with my co-facilitator and continued through to September 2008, when a final reflection meeting with my co-facilitator took place.

#### *Focus children's assessment data*

The teachers at each cluster meeting provided documented assessment data for each child. This included learning stories and work samples and, in some cases, documented notes from primary teachers. Early childhood teachers began this process and, as children entered school, the primary teachers continued contributing documentation of children's learning. All assessment documentation was collected and filed at each cluster meeting.

Teacher discussion about the children, shared during cluster meetings, was documented and collated to summarise sequentially each child's experience. The summary document was added to at each meeting and provided to teacher participants to revisit and reflect on prior to and during subsequent meetings.

*Field notes*

Throughout the research I kept a learning journal in which I documented my reflective thoughts and insights; my field notes. During cluster meetings, I gathered direct quotes and key points of discussion and debate from teachers, along with records of activities and artifacts used or developed by the group. I kept a record of the interactions with participants and my co-facilitator in between cluster meetings.

My learning journal was frequently revisited throughout the course of the research and proved invaluable for sorting my thoughts about some of the key ideas that began to emerge. For instance, because documentation of research activity was only recorded on right hand pages of my journal I was able to document subsequent insights or revelations on the left hand page, thus illuminating my thinking and making this easily accessible during preparation for the writing phase of the research. As I analysed and interpreted my data, considerable time was spent revisiting the learning journal. Eventually I took the journal apart to position entries in a sequential timeframe alongside all other documentation collected. The need to retain data in sequence became important as I found I needed to view this data while analysing the children's learning experiences to retain an accurate picture of what teachers were talking about in relation to what children were experiencing.

*Documentation of cluster meetings*

Eight meetings of the EELL cluster group, held between July 2007 and June 2008, were documented as comprehensive meeting minutes that recorded the group's activity. This included the key discussion points, emerging ideas and understandings, collation of tasks undertaken and tasks to complete. This was made possible by the co-facilitation of these meetings as one or other facilitator took responsibility for documenting the minutes during the meeting while the other was free to facilitate the activity of the group.

Following meetings the draft minutes were passed from one facilitator to the other, at which time additions and corrections were made. Tasks, continuing reflective questions and details of the next meeting were added before the minutes were distributed via e-mail to all participants. This documentation became a cultural artifact of the group in a way that Wenger (1998) describes the production of artifacts as reification. Wenger argues that "participation and reification provide dual avenues for exercising influence on what becomes of practice" (p.91).

Participants came together eight times over the course of the year and as busy teachers, and facilitators, it could have been very easy to lose connection with the group in between meetings. The minutes provided a way to remain connected with the thinking and ideas of the group so that in some way members could continue to 'participate' beyond face-to-face contact. Every set of meeting minutes contained critically reflective

questions that had arisen in group discussion. The meeting documentation as an artifact of the group held potential to affect teacher thinking or practice beyond the group context as participants could revisit the group's emerging queries in their own setting. Wenger (ibid) describes reification and participation as mutually convergent and divergent: "In moments of negotiation of meaning they come into contact and affect each other" (p.87).

*Tape-recorded and transcribed participant conversations*

Teachers were supported with release funding to enable them to visit each other in the other sector during the day. Two half-day visits were undertaken by each participant during the first six months, the first on their own as a familiarisation visit and the second accompanied by one of the facilitators to focus observation on literacy teaching and learning. I accompanied the primary teachers on their visits to early childhood and my co-facilitator accompanied early childhood teachers on visits to school on their second visit. Discussions at subsequent cluster meetings included reflection on these observation visits.

Portions of two out of eight cluster meetings were tape-recorded and transcribed and a further three cluster meetings were fully tape-recorded and transcribed. In the initial phase of establishing the group I felt the use of the tape recorder was an imposition on participants. Time was needed for participants to develop trusting relationships between each other as well as with my role as researcher. The first meeting was documented in

my journal. I used the tape recorder at strategic times to capture particular discussions at the second and third meetings, however found preparing the tape-recorder for these times distracting for participants. There were also times when I found myself wishing I had the tape on as I was unable to effectively anticipate when the insightful conversations might occur. At the third meeting it became very evident that relationships were well established as participants engaged in critical dialogue before facilitators even had the opportunity to formally begin the session. At that time I found my tape recorder out of reach and felt it would have impeded the dialogue if I had attempted to set it up so I relied on documenting the conversation in my journal. From that point onwards I chose to fully tape-record three further meetings.

Tape-recording and transcribing the cluster meeting conversations assisted in ensuring that my bias toward the early childhood sector did not cloud my research decision-making in terms of what I took notice of in my data. I had accurate data that kept conversations embedded in the context of the group. This helped me to avoid inadvertently filtering out or privileging the voices of either sector.

*Documentation provided by teachers and parents.*

Teachers contributed their own documentation as it was deemed appropriate. I did not orchestrate or expect this but was conscious of

teacher documentation as valuable data. In the early stages of the cluster group I approached teachers to ask if I could collect their documentation and as time went on teachers offered their documentation for research purposes. The type of documentation varied. At times teachers prepared notes to support their contributions to cluster meeting discussions. For example, documented notes during visits to other settings, or documented notes about the focus children in support of the formal assessment material they shared. In one case a teacher documented her conversation with two children about starting school.

When parents were approached for their thoughts about their child's learning they documented their responses for teachers to share at cluster meetings. This documentation was also collected as research data.

### *Communications between co-facilitators*

Documented communication between co-facilitators was collected. This included email communications and records of regular planning and preparation meetings. This documentation included our ideas for inclusion at cluster meetings and the underpinning reasons for the direction we were choosing to make. As we had a professionally close and trusting relationship, our communications were frequently candid. Our conversations involved a process of co-analysis of the progress of the professional development and emerging insights. Revisiting the documentation of these communications alongside analysis of other



forms of research data proved useful as the memory of events and our discussion added confidence to my interpretations.

At our final meeting I presented a draft of my analysis of the focus children's experiences to my co-facilitator. Discussion at this point helped to clarify my understandings about sector difference in assessment and literacy practices and the patterns I was beginning to view in relation to literacy learning continuity.

### **Data analysis**

As I immersed myself in the data I had collected over the sixteen months of my research study, I found myself coming up with more questions than answers. As I looked to teacher conversations I became intrigued with why some aspects of practice proved so difficult for teachers. Why did some teachers feel so constrained in their practices while others took liberty to do as they wanted? My initial attempts in analysing the research data could be likened to piecing a large jigsaw together. I became interested in what teachers perceived to influence difference in practices within each sector, and how these differences played out as influences on children's learning during transition to school.

### **Co-constructed analysis of data about the children**

Participant teacher and facilitator co-analysis contributed to the presentation and discussion of the children's experiences in this report. At

the final cluster meeting of the EELL group the complete documented summary of all six children's assessment data and discussion was represented to the group. Working in cross-sector pairs (one primary and one early childhood teacher) participants explored the children's learning stories, work samples and notes contained in the summary document, for examples of learning continuity. Participants were provided with the following work-sheet (table 3) and asked to document their reflections on the questions posed.

**Table 2. Child's continuity task**

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>What aspects of continuity in the child's experiences/learning are visible?</li> </ul>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>How has prior knowledge of the child influenced ongoing teaching &amp; learning?</li> </ul>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>In what ways could things have been done differently?</li> <li>E.g Is there other information that we could have collected that would better have captured the child's learning shifts over time?</li> </ul>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Further comments?</li> </ul>	

The whole group came together to discuss the findings, involving all participants in analysis of this data. This discussion was tape recorded and transcribed. Differing views and perspectives were listened to,

discussed and debated. The presentation of these stories retains the authenticity of participant voices and perspectives so that interpretation of the children's experiences is not mine alone.

*Developing a frame for analysis*

Rogoff (2003) offers a frame for analysis of socio-cultural activity that enables one to view and analyse mutually constituting phenomena through the use of what she calls intrapersonal, interpersonal and cultural institutional lenses. Analysis involves a process of 'backgrounding' and 'foregrounding' the focus, or lens, for analysis to enable one aspect to be studied in relation to the others. As Rogoff states: "No aspect exists or can be studied in isolation from the others. An observer's relative focus on one or the other aspect can be changed, but they do not exist apart from each other" (p.58).

Rogoff's frames for analysis provided a way to look at the interrelationship between the levels of Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological model. For example, foregrounding the cultural institutional lens enables one to explore how culturally or institutionally embedded ways of acting and being (the macrosystem) influence what children experience in their learning environment (the micro system).

Rogoff's lenses of analysis are grounded in a socio-cultural 'transformation of participation' perspective on human development. As Rogoff describes:

From my perspective, people develop as they participate in and contribute to cultural activities that themselves develop with the involvement of people in successive generations. People of each generation, as they engage in sociocultural endeavours with other people, make use of and extend cultural tools and practices inherited from previous generations. (p.52)

I relate this understanding to the context of my research in that a child's learning experiences are embedded in a context that is influenced by the teachers, who in turn have been influenced by the historic, current, and future education context they are in. Discussion amongst teachers at cluster meetings revealed some of the influences on their thinking and how these impacted on practice. Differences in pedagogical beliefs have a direct impact on approaches to teaching and learning. For example, how teachers view their role and that of the learner influences the choice of teaching strategies, the learning environment provided, and whether or not prior learning is acknowledged.

I documented my ideas for exploring my data using Rogoff's lenses for analysis in the following table. My research lens focused on exploring the space between the experiences of children and the context of teaching in each sector.

**Table 3. Exploring the data – what do I take notice of?**

<b>Lens of analysis</b>	<b>Teachers</b>	<b>My lens – bringing understanding to the juncture between teacher practice and children's experiences</b>	<b>Children</b>
<b>Intrapersonal lens:</b> influence of the immediate environments.	Aspirations of teachers, what they bring to their role, influences on teacher ability to teach in their setting, how they view the learner in their setting.		Child's experience during transition to school, was continuity of literacy learning evident? How does this show itself?
<b>Interpersonal lens;</b> adult environment and the relationships between these; EC & primary relationships, parents/home.	Relationship between early childhood and primary, and teachers and parents – the influence of knowing about the other sector and about the transitioning child.		The influence of the relationship between early childhood & school, and between parents and teachers on children's transitioning experience.
<b>Cultural/institutional lens:</b> national influences such as those relayed through curriculum, assessment, literacy project.	Curriculum expectations and interpretations, how this is acted on in terms of assessment, approaches to literacy teaching.		Influence of curriculum implementation, how difference in sector curriculum is experienced, how this might influence continuity for children?

**In summary**

A group of teachers and co-facilitators participated in this study as a community of learners engaged in cross-sector consultation and collaboration. The teachers, from both early childhood and primary sectors, investigated early literacy learning and, through observation and conversation, explored sector difference. The collection and sharing of assessment data about six children as they transitioned between the two sectors provided opportunity to explore the research question of how sector difference might influence children's learning during transition from early childhood to school.

I have provided a description of the research participants and context, and the underpinning theoretical frame that guided the approach to professional development and research as well as the approach to analysis. Socio-cultural constructivist views of learning underpin this study as evidenced in the methodology described.

In the following chapters I present the findings of my investigations. In chapter four I explore and describe three of the six focus children's experience of continuity during transition and look for influences on their learning experiences. My lens then shifts in chapter five to consider the perspectives of participant teachers as they share insights into the influences on practice in each sector. I strive to bring understanding to the effect of sector difference on the ways in which children's learning continuity was experienced.

## Chapter four: Ruby, Michelle and Ash – making the transition

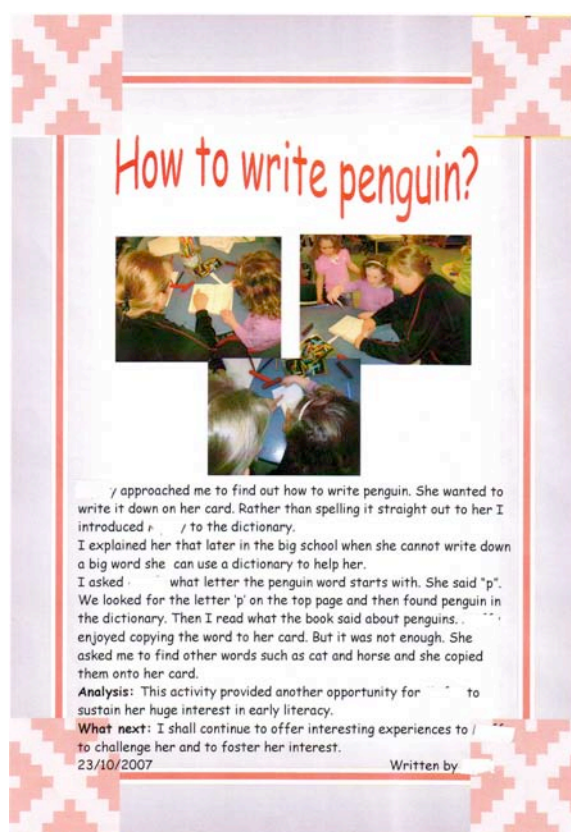
### **Introduction to the stories about the children – the intrapersonal lens**

In this chapter I focus on transition to school and early literacy learning as I describe and explore Ruby, Michelle and Ash's experience as learners engaged with their learning environments from early childhood to school. Ruby, Michelle and Ash are three of the study's six focus children. While each of the six children's transition to school experience was different there were interesting commonalities between some. Ruby, Michelle and Ash's stories were selected as they offered sufficient variation in their individual experiences for discussion purposes while also mirroring the experiences of the other three children. Collectively their experiences are representative of the group as a whole.

The children's stories weave together the formal and informal assessment data gathered from teachers at cluster meetings, along with teacher and parent conversations about the children. Individual children's experiences of moving from early childhood to school are explored in order to learn what continuity of literacy learning might be like from the child's experience. Each child's story is summed up to discuss the child's continuity of learning experience.







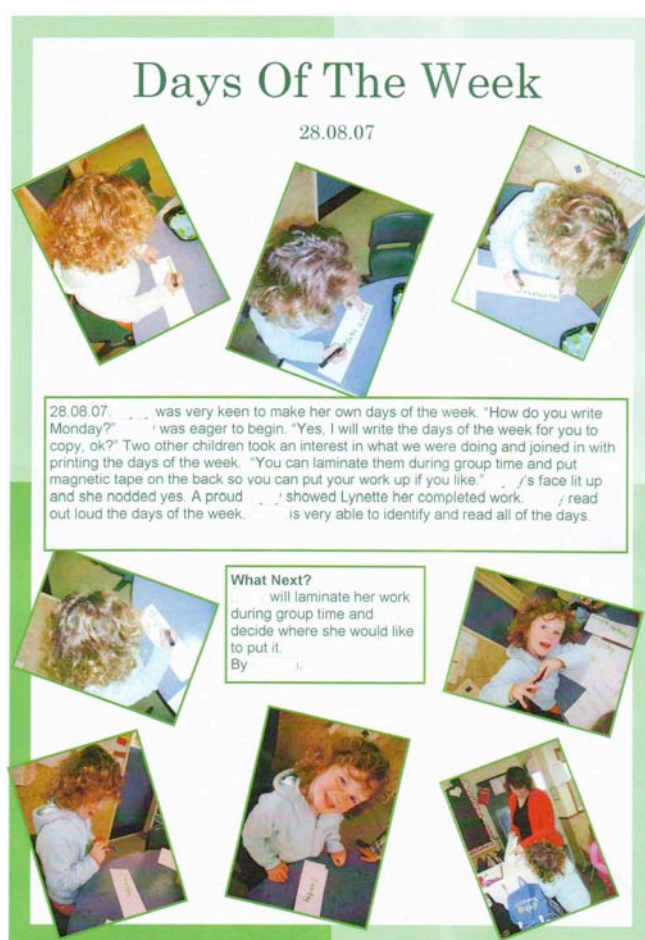
**Exhibit 2 How do I write Penguin?**

By early November, Ruby was described as being more independent in her written literacy: writing her name, naming letters of the alphabet, in control of writing left to right, accurate letter formation. Her learning stories at this time captured the way Ruby was interested in using text to spell words. She confidently accessed support from teachers to assist her as the story above describes.

Ruby's early childhood teachers had, over time, introduced her to a number of strategies to support her literacy interest including copying from text written for her, copying from name cards available in the centre, and

accessing information from books. Ruby was described as a keen and active contributor of ideas to the tasks and activities of the older children's daily group time. In a selection of stories presented to one cluster meeting she was seen to contribute the idea of learning about days of the week. The stories followed her through a process where firstly, the teacher wrote the words for the days and then laminated them for the children to use.

As Ruby played with these she was seen to attempt sounding out the first letter of each word. This strategy enabled her to recognise the word in subsequent activity with the name cards. In the following days teachers supported Ruby's keenness to make her own set as Exhibit 3 describes.



**Exhibit 3 Days of the week**

Ruby's mother confirmed the image early childhood teachers held of Ruby as a confident and inquisitive literacy learner. In the month before Ruby

transitioned to school, her mother contributed her perception of Ruby as 'leading her own education'. Her thoughts about Ruby's impending transition to the school environment were documented as follows:

Nov. 07 – Ruby's mother

Ruby loves reading and writing – she is very inquisitive, wanting to know what words say, how to spell words etc.

At home she likes reading stories, looking at labels on things and signs, looking through the newspaper and magazines, writing people's names, writing her own name on cards and letters etc... Writing stories, writing long sentences with all of the letters spelt out

We support her literacy learning by taking the time to answer all of the questions. Doing lots of writing and reading 'anything and everything'.

We are confident the centre supports her literacy learning; especially from the parent evening where we discussed group times and preparing for school.

We think Ruby is a good learner because she is naturally inquisitive and curious. She leads her own education and is very persistent. She is starting to show that she will be able to learn independently. She'll be in the 'driving seat' of her education.

I am feeling confident that she will settle well into school, as she is familiar with so many of the basics now and will continue to grow. She has been given a very good grounding to her further education.

#### **Exhibit 4 Comment from Ruby's mother**

Ruby attended a series of school visits with her mother prior to beginning school just as the 2007 year was drawing to a close. At the first cluster meeting of 2008 the primary teacher began sharing her assessments and observations of Ruby at school. She described how Ruby was transitioning into the school environment and provided some informal assessment of her literacy learning. The following teacher notes were shared:

21.2.08 Generally confident in the mornings, but some days clingy with Mum. Easily distracted so Mum can escape! Quite an organiser in a nice way! Can dominate at news time.

A very wide vocab. Extensive knowledge of the world around her. Enjoys chatting 1-1 about life in general. Can be very serious.

Keen to learn. Very focussed at mat-time and always contributes. Settles to tasks and perseveres until the task is completed. Keen for her work to be on the 'quality work' table. Proud of her efforts. Lovely to see Mum come in after school and show an interest in Ruby's learning.

Socialises well and is very kind. Calls N.. her mate!

#### **Exhibit 5 Comment from Ruby's teacher**

Discussion at the teacher meeting revealed further detail such as how she is keen to do things to a high standard, has lots of words and is a confident writer, writes with meaning and in line. At the next meeting in April 2008 her teacher shared a writing example and talked about Ruby's learning. This was documented in the meeting minutes as shown in Exhibit 6.

3.4.08 Still plays on mum but easily distracted. Doing writing (including) 2<sup>nd</sup> sounds she can hear. Can do a lot independently – (see writing example) 'I went to Kaikoura' using sounds she can hear.

(Is) Thinking about other things like full stops etc. Has a written word bank of common words she can write by herself.

Knows heaps of words (reading), reading level 5, (end of red), letter sound knowledge fine, maths can recognise numbers, after numbers and count backwards, 2+3 using fingers, 40 numbers, extremely confident in the classroom and outside the class. Really motivated to do news board, writing captions up, eg running city to surf, knows what expectations are. Lots of parent support.



#### **Exhibit 6 Comments from Ruby's teacher and work sample**

At the next meeting in June, Ruby's teacher again provided a commentary on her learning that was documented in the meeting minutes:

**5.6.08** Doing great – continues to be funny in mornings. Takes on responsibilities, helps others as a peer tutor. Lots of initiative, independent, happy, wonderful oral language, brings things to school eg. newspaper, mum interested and asking about helping at home, reading level 7, can write heaps of words, finds words on chart, in stage 2 numeracy (adding etc in mind, imaging).

#### **Exhibit 7 Final comment from Ruby's teacher**

Ruby's teacher talked to Ruby about her transition experiences and documented this to share with the cluster group. The conversation between teacher and Ruby provides insight into how Ruby was positive about school and viewed herself as a competent reader and writer:

#### **Teacher/Ruby conversation June 2008**

- Q When you were almost 5 did you want to start school?
- A Yes
- Q What did you think school was going to be like?
- A Fun
- Q Was it fun?
- A Yes, it was really fun
- Q What did you think you were going to do at school?
- A Learn how to read and write
- Q Who told you this?
- A Mum, Trish and Kathy (teachers)
- Q Did you know how to read and write before you came to school?
- A I could read 3 little pigs and I could write my name
- Q So did you learn to read and write when you came to school?
- A Yes
- Q What things did you like doing at school?
- A Learning the alphabet
- Q What didn't you like?
- A Colouring in
- Q Was there anything that worried you?
- A I didn't know where the toilets were and I went into the boy's toilet once.

#### **Exhibit 8 Ruby & teacher conversation transcript**

*Ruby's continuity of learning*

Continuity in Ruby's literacy learning is quite evident through the data presented. Ruby's interest in literacy was recognised and responded to by all adults in her world; there was a strong sense of connectedness between each environment. Literacy tasks and ways of learning between home, early childhood and school held familiarity and purposefulness for Ruby; her image as a literacy learner was not interrupted.

In early childhood, Ruby directed her own learning, with teachers assisting her to follow through with her ideas and introducing her to strategies she could use to support herself. She had a sound foundation of literacy ability prior to beginning school. Her literacy independence enabled her to 'fit' with expectations in the school environment. Ruby shared a common goal for learning with the school, that she expressed as to 'learn to read and write.'

Through participation in this cross-sector professional development group Ruby's primary teacher had the benefit of getting to know Ruby in a way that she may otherwise not have done. The influence of this prior knowledge was expressed by the teacher as "I knew Ruby was doing wonderful things at the centre, so my expectations of Ruby were quite high...which is probably good" (T5: p.8).

**Michelle treads water**

Michelle was four years ten months when we began our cluster meetings. She had only been attending early childhood for a brief month and had not attended any early childhood prior to this. Her early childhood teacher, Betty, described how they were just getting to know her; that her extended family had visited the centre and her mother was expecting a new baby.

At the two Cluster meetings prior to Michelle beginning school Betty described her as being particularly interested in art and craft and that she was communicating through her illustrations, with clear ideas about what she needed to achieve her task. Learning stories described Michelle's emerging interest in recognising and writing her name. Early childhood teachers were actively encouraging and supporting this interest through their interactions with Michelle and the activities they offered. The following excerpt from one learning story (Exhibit 9) encapsulates this:

### Letters of the world

#### Excerpt from a Learning story for Michelle, August 2007

.....What great literacy teaching and learning opportunities this created for the children and I wanted to spend some time with you. I knew that you would be attracted to this table and as soon as I saw you sit down I joined you. Ash was already hard at work, spelling out his name, his sisters name, his mum and dad. You sat and observed. Harry had already spelled his name onto the cardboard, and Ash was busy finding the letters and gluing them onto the cardboard.

You continued to sit and observe. Then you announced: *'Betty, I could put my name on the cardboard.'* Great! I said, 'let's get to work!' because there were so many letters I suggested that maybe I could spread some out for you to make letters easier to find. You nodded in agreement. The finding began, quickly you found an M, and announced; *"this is an M, my name starts with a M."* Together we found some space to glue on the first letter.

Now, to find the next letter. I asked if you knew what the next letter of your name, Michelle, was? You said *"no, but I think that it has a dot and a stick."* I assured you that it did have a dot and a stick and was called an I. I wondered if you knew what to make first, the dot or the stick?

I really liked the way you instinctively used your finger on the table to make an I, and made the dot first and then the stick, and then you asked me, *"is that right?"* I put my hand over yours and guided my finger to retrace saying, *"the stick and then the dot. Together we have made an I, now let's see if we can find one."* Quick as a flash you found one and glued it next to the M.

Ash was still working away and your attention was back over his side of the table. You noticed that he had placed a B on the cardboard. You commented *"that's a B, your name starts with a B, Betty."*

*"can you think of any children who have an B at the beginning of their name?"* you looked around and then said, *"Blade does have a B, and Brodie does."* Ash and I agreed. Your attention went back to the task in hand and we needed to find the next letter of your name. I asked you *"we have an M and an I, so what letter do you think comes next Michelle?"*.....

#### Exhibit 9 Learning story excerpt

A learning story two weeks later described Michelle again being supported in her interest with the letters of her name while participating in a game with her peers. In the learning story her teacher made a comment to Michelle about her participation:

You were not afraid to have a try at answering questions about the letter vests, and used trial and error as a teaching and learning opportunity. ... you easily communicated your thoughts, ideas and needs to the whole group mat-time, while persisting on with the task, modeling good skills for listening, concentration, and following instructions. (teacher documentation Sept.07)

Michelle's mother provided further insight into Michelle's interest in text when she shared information about what Michelle does at home:



**Feedback from Michelle's mother, Sept 07**

*At home Michelle:*

*Reads stories with Grandma (Grandma reads, Michelle listens), likes to identify letters on signs when out and about. (She) is better with numbers than letters.*

*We help her at home by:*

*Word/letter recognition. Michael has the Dora the Explorer computer editions that come out fortnightly which she is an expert at now. We have always talked to her like she is an adult and encouraged conversation in real words not baby talk.*

*How do you feel about her moving to school?*

*Fine. She has been ready for school for many months now.*

*Yes, she is a good learner.*

**Exhibit 10 Feedback from mother**

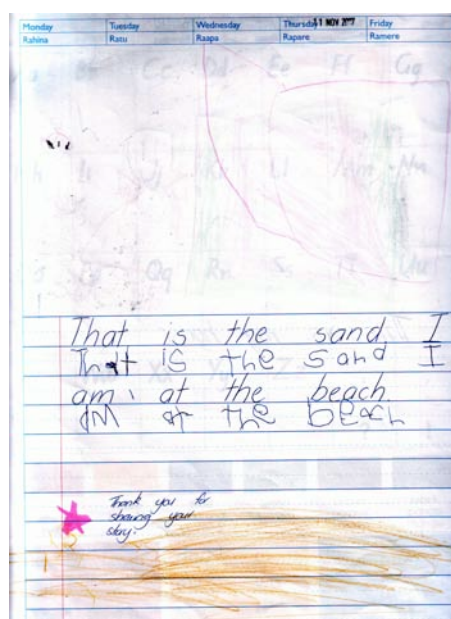
Michelle's early childhood teacher talked about Michelle's literacy learning just prior to her beginning school. She described her as having fantastic language in terms of wanting to share stories, ideas, thoughts and feelings with others. Michelle had developed real interest in writing her name and asked about spelling others - for example, Mum. Learning strategies she was seen to use frequently were to observe others before attempting things for herself, and copying text for her own purposes. Michelle displayed ability to recall previous learning, to concentrate and listen and to socially participate within a group context.

Prior to beginning school early in October Michelle had gained some familiarity with her class through visiting the school with her mother and the classroom teacher visiting her in her early childhood setting. At our November meeting her schoolteacher reported that Michelle was reading at red 1 and working on starting her own story independently, as shown in the following work sample (Exhibit 11).



**Exhibit 11 Independent work**

In exhibit 11 Michelle displays her ability to form letters and work left to right. The word ‘the’ is repeated three times and may suggest she has some knowledge of ‘the’ as a high frequency word.



**Exhibit 12 Copying**

A work sample from November (Exhibit 12) shows how Michelle successfully used the strategy for writing she was familiar with from her early childhood environment, that of copying the text written by the teacher to tell her story.

At the beginning of 2008 a different picture of Michelle’s learning began to emerge. Her primary teacher shared her concerns with the cluster group:

Very high parental expectations are being voiced, she has gone

back to where she was. Is saying “I can’t do this”. Is reading on magenta again. Was finger spacing, and using initial sounds (when writing), but isn’t using these skills now. Her mother is saying Michelle can’t do this etc. and Michelle is hearing this. This pressure is affecting learning. (Meeting notes: Feb 08).

The examples of Michelle’s written work over this period of time suggest that Michelle’s written literacy learning has been affected. In the following three work samples collected between the end of February and end of March, Michelle’s writing remains constant with limited development evident. She appeared to be ‘treading water’.



**Exhibits 13 Michelle treading water**

In April her teacher explained that Michelle was now moving along.

“Persuasive writing is the theme this term with personal writing the major focus. Word knowledge is displayed in Michelle’s stories now” (Meeting notes: April 08). The following work samples (Exhibit 14) illustrate this:

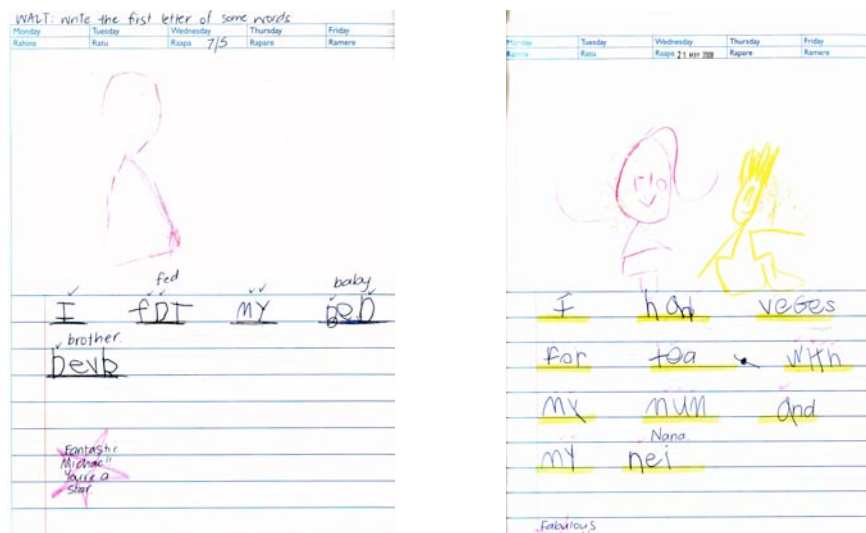


**Exhibit 14 Michelle moving along**

At the June meeting her teacher spoke enthusiastically of Michelle's progress.

She's lovely. Even her high frequency words have been actually quite good at this stage. So mum has stopped pressuring the teachers as much. She has got 23 out of 50 (sharing assessment results), doing really well. She's responsible in the classroom, she's managing quite well. And Michelle's goal in term 1 is to complete her work in shorter time. She's using a lot of her known words in her writing. And you can see just from having that knowledge she is ...yep....She's up to reading red 3 now. So she's picking up some good strategies and she loves coming to school. (Meeting notes: June 08)

The following work samples (Exhibit 15) illustrate Michelle's progress:



**Exhibit 15 Michelle's Progress**

### *Michelle's continuity of learning*

Michelle's early interest in literacy learning was sensitively supported both at home and early childhood. Michelle's mother indicated that she was insightful about early literacy learning and that Michelle was actively encouraged in oral and text based literacy by her family. The first learning stories shared from early childhood described the teacher scaffolding Michelle's early attempts at recognising letters in her name. The teacher displayed knowledge of where Michelle was at and what might capture her interest. Michelle's early literacy learning was situated in the social context of the early childhood environment where she had the opportunity to observe others for cues about her own participation. Her early literacy

attempts see Michelle as an interdependent learner; achievement occurred when teacher and child worked together.

Continuity of Michelle's literacy learning from early childhood to school was evident from October to the end of the year as Michelle approached her writing tasks using the familiar learning strategy of copying. The period between February and April appeared to be a time of interrupted learning for Michelle as approaches to literacy learning quickly shifted from working interdependently to needing to be independent in writing. In discussion at one meeting Michelle's teacher talked about the pressure she felt to move children to independence and explained that this move occurs quickly as she gets them "on to it [independent writing] pretty fast" (Meeting transcript 5; p.12).

Michelle needed to adjust from informal and exploratory literacy tasks to more formalised ones where expectations of the way things are done differed. Would Michelle's experience have differed had she started school at a different time of the year? The beginning of a new school year brought with it new children and new relationships for the teacher to concentrate on. Michelle was no longer the 'new' child and teacher expectations possibly shifted accordingly.

**Ash stands still**

Ash began attending his early childhood centre as an under-two year old. At the time of the first cluster meeting he was aged four years and nine months. He had an older sibling at school and a younger one in the under-two area of the childcare centre.

His primary caregiver shared her knowledge of Ash at the first two cluster meetings. She described his strong interest in insects/bugs that had continued over time. Ash's collection of learning stories over the previous two years revealed how knowledgeable he could be about factual information in relation to insects and how he confidently contributed his knowledge in discussions with peers and teachers. Over time he had actively involved himself in exploring cicadas and worms in a number of ways including using reference books, visiting a garden waste place and developing a wormery at the early childhood centre where he also displayed quite a sense of humour and imagination in his conversations.

Ash had been experimenting with writing over time. At three years of age he was drawing simple drawings and adding his interpretation through conversation. A year later he had an 'office' at home and involved himself in the one set up at the centre. The following story (Exhibit 16) captures his early participation in this.





Through participating in many small group activities Ash had shown a growing interest in numbers and literacy. An example of this developing interest is shown through a letter he wrote to an injured police dog. News of a police dog's injury in the line of duty had been shared with a group of children. Ash joined others to draw a picture and write a message to the injured dog. The following (Exhibit 18) is his letter to the dog.





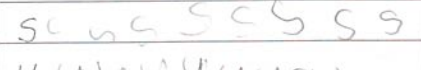




**Exhibit 18 Letter to police dog**

Just prior to beginning school his early childhood teacher described Ash as “having knowledge of measurement, money, identifies numerals (especially 5), and has started writing and recognising the letters of his name” (Meeting notes: Aug 07).

Unfortunately, at the last minute, Ash's parents changed their minds about which school Ash would go to so that he began attending a school that was

not represented in our cluster group. The early childhood teacher supported Ash's mother during Ash's transition to this school by accompanying her to the initial visit. This experience was shared with the cluster group as the teacher explained that, "the school didn't encourage school visits as the Principal said he believed children just want to be here" (Meeting notes: Nov 07). However Ash's mother requested school visits and Ash visited twice before starting school. Ash's profile book was taken along on one of those visits and the new entrant teacher had commented to the parent that it was a 'nice scrapbook.'

Ash's early childhood teacher had opportunity to visit Ash's school in June 2008 and asked how he was getting on. When she explained the purpose of the professional development cluster, Ash's primary teacher willingly contributed his literacy assessment data. The following exhibits illustrate Ash's literacy learning in the early months at school. The first data for his six-week assessment was gathered early November. The first two samples (Exhibit 19) give an insight into his handwriting and spelling at that time.

Handwriting Samples		Learning Outcomes	
Name: <u>ASH</u>		Date: <u>5 Nov 2007</u>	
Level 1 (highlight mastered LOs)		Left/right handed	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• sit letters on the line</li> <li>• directional movement works left to right</li> <li>• form all letters and numerals from correct starting point</li> <li>• form correct shape</li> <li>• use correct size</li> <li>• use correct letter spacing</li> <li>• use correct posture</li> </ul>		Correct/incorrect pencil grip	
Level 2 (highlight mastered LOs)			
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• add ligatures to letters</li> <li>• begin to link letters</li> <li>• start to slope letters correctly</li> <li>• form numerals correctly</li> </ul>			
Level 3 (highlight mastered LOs)			
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• consistent linkages in handwriting</li> <li>• use linking in handwriting</li> <li>• developing own style of handwriting based on previous instruction</li> <li>• write with sufficient speed</li> <li>• write accurately with correct shape, size and slope</li> </ul>			
Level 4 (highlight mastered LOs)			
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• write legibly with increasing speed and endurance</li> </ul>			
			
			
			
			
Student evaluation:   			

Curriculum Handwriting Sample Y1- Jan 2004

13 FEB 2008  
Spelling Essential Lists

Name: ASH

Essential List 1		Essential List 2	
1	a	1	
2	mum and	2	
3	scissors	3	
4	yummy in	4	
5	I am it	5	
6	my	6	
7	the	7	
8	to	8	
9	was	9	
10	we	10	
11	h	11	
12	%	12	

Exhibit 19 Ash uses text

In these samples Ash has shown knowledge of the formation of some alphabet letters, almost correctly placing them on lines, and even putting together three letters to form a familiar word, mum. Of interest in the handwriting sample is that Ash has provided some indication of how he felt about his writing effort. He has marked the smiley face, which may indicate he felt happy with his work.

The spelling assessment scores Ash as 0 out of 10. He had not demonstrated letter sound recognition in the formation of the text. Ash shows how he has begun to string letters together, indicating that he has some understanding that groups of letters make up words, Unfortunately

this assessment does not acknowledge this learning and it is unknown as to whether the teacher made this learning explicit to Ash during conversation.

26.2.08  
Date: 5.2.08

**Written Language Sample**

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

**Deeper features**

I can...

**1a**

- write about something I have done
- read my story to my class
- make my story match my picture

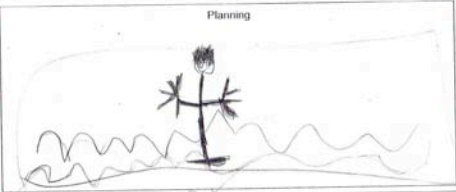
**1b**

- re-read my story to see if it makes sense
- read my story to my class
- use my picture as a plan for my writing

**1c**

- write about something I have done using describing words

Planning



1 a m m u p u r

I went in the little pool.

**Surface features**

I can...

**1a**

- write a sentence
- spell some words
- try letters for sounds I hear
- leave spaces between some words
- get myself ready to start writing my story
- start in the right place

**1b**

- write the beginning and end sounds in words
- leave space between my words
- spell some words correctly from lists 1 and 2
- write two sentences

**1c**

- edit my writing for spelling, capital letters and full stops

One thing I would do next time is... Write down more of the sounds I hear in my story and leave spaces.

Y1

**Exhibit 20 Written language sample**

The written language assessment (Exhibit 20) above again shows Ash stringing letters together.

The assessment format used focuses teacher attention on surface features of writing such as letter sound relationships, directionality and spacing, and deeper features such as re-reading, sense making and descriptive vocabulary. The teacher is drawn to comment on surface features as Ash has yet to display sufficient understanding of the written task; using and writing words in such a way as to convey meaning in relation to his illustration.

Further data collected in May 2008 included a word identification list and reading record (Exhibit 21). These two assessments indicate that Ash has made limited progress in his knowledge of words and word formation.

**ACER WORD IDENTIFICATION TEST**

RECORD OF PUPIL'S PERFORMANCE

Name: ..... Age: ..... Grade: .....  
 School: ..... Date: .....  
 can tap see doll met  
 had pin is hen top  
 on an to sun mud  
 up my nest her milk  
 so tree jump want bucket  
 whip me sled drink little  
 happy horse this apple boat  
 have earth string seat wheel  
 happy step knot handle uncle  
 brother pear bir yesterday cottage  
 valley chair underneath doctor coach  
 funny shoulder appear roughly caught  
 rooster struggled bargain galloped  
 caterpillar enough towel steadily messenger

cupboard guess wiggling  
 counterpane place grace  
 ceiling neighbour divide  
 commenced candlestick horizontal  
 scullery guinea periscope  
 donation aquarium buoyant  
 hydraulic chair melting  
 menagery chairtable alleviate  
 nauseous masquerade equanimity  
 ephemeral cataract valetudinarian

Level 3  
Ash

**PM** Reading Record

Name: ..... Age: ..... Date: 12.5.08  
 Text: Wake up, Father Bear Level: 3 R.W. 69  
 Accuracy: ..... S.C. Rate: .....  
 11/6

Page	E	S.C.	Errors MSV	Self corrections MSV
2				
3				
4				
6				
8				
10				
12				
14				
16				

Total

**Exhibit 21 Ash's progress**

In an assessment statement documented in July 2008 his teacher noted:

I referred Ash to the individual needs teacher in February and he has been attending sessions for phonological awareness in term 1 & 2. Hopefully these sessions can continue as I still have concerns about his letter/sound connections. His self help skills are good and he manages the class routines well. He speaks well in front of the class and is social and friendly with his peers. Attention can waver and he needs to be kept on task. ('Other school' teacher notes: July 08)

During the early childhood teacher's visit to Ash's class she observed Ash directed to sit at the 'teacher legs' due to his restlessness and inappropriate

behaviour. She commented to the cluster group that it appeared Ash was ‘switched off to his learning.’ This view appeared to be shared by his mother. The early childhood teacher retained contact with Ash’s mother throughout this study, as a younger sibling attended the childcare centre. Ash’s mother shared her concerns about Ash at school. “I think he’s not as interested as he used to be. Happy to go to school but loses focus sometimes”. (Meeting notes: Feb 09)

### *Ash’s continuity of learning*

Ash’s journey as an early literacy learner was uneven. His learning appeared to have been interrupted as he began school. He was supported at home to explore and purposefully use literacy tools and text. In early childhood he had an identity as a curious and interested literacy user as he attempted to use literacy tools in ways that were purposeful and meaningful to him. The significant adults in his world encouraged Ash’s written literacy interest.

In early childhood he showed he could write his name and his teachers celebrated this by documenting the learning story. The early childhood teachers were not seen to intentionally extend on Ash’s literacy achievement. In the learning story they stated they would further support him although the strategy suggested was to ensure resources were available. I am drawn to wonder whether Ash’s early childhood teachers could have been more intentional in supporting him to learn about the

order and formation of the letters in his name. Further data about Ash's literacy learning indicated that the teachers did not take this action but rather introduced Ash to other purposeful written language tasks.

His early attempts to be a literacy learner at school suggested he had a positive sense of himself as a capable literacy learner, although the work samples provided suggest his literacy use was less purposeful and meaningful to him. He completed the set handwriting task in a manner he deemed was expected by placing letters on the lines. All five of the primary assessment exhibits would indicate that Ash had yet to extend his learning from writing his name where he shows initial knowledge of how individual letters can be grouped together to make a word.

### **Learning from the children's experiences**

The children responded differently to their new school environment. Ruby indicated how change in routines such as toileting had provided an initial challenge but one that she quickly overcame. She was described as being a bit clingy in the mornings, which could be reflective of adapting to new routines and needing to develop a new relationship with her teacher. Ruby expressed her own enjoyment of school by saying that it was fun. Both Ash and Michelle were described, by their parents, as happy about going to school.

Continuity of literacy learning during transitions was experienced differently by each of the three children in this study as the headings of each child's story suggest. Ruby's literacy learning progressed rapidly, Michelle's was interrupted and Ash's stood still. Differences in teacher practices in each sector emerged as factors that influenced literacy learning continuity for these children. Literacy learning contexts and assessment practices were visibly different between the sectors. Alongside these sector differences, an influential factor in children's continuity during the transition was that of the relationship between parent and teacher in the new learning environment.

There is a relationship between these recurrent themes of difference and Peters' (2000) research findings where less freedom of choice at school was identified as the main discontinuity in children's experiences. Less freedom of choice for the children in this study occurred as a direct result of the difference in literacy learning context. Further exploration of each of the identified factors of difference can assist to develop understanding of where and how the differences experienced by the children became problematic.

### **Difference in literacy learning contexts**

All three children displayed knowledge of, and capabilities with, literacy to different degrees prior to school. The way early childhood teachers and parents described children's involvement with literacy suggested they were



curious and interested in literacy practices. They were seen to use literacy tools purposefully, initiate use of literacy to achieve tasks and persevere to accomplish their own goals. Their involvement in literacy learning in prior to school contexts was described within a social context. They participated alongside others; parent, teacher or more able peers. Their literacy learning to that point was socially mediated and they displayed motivation to learn within purposeful literacy practices.

The context for literacy learning appeared to change in the school environment as literacy began to be presented in the form of tasks that children completed independently during specific periods of the daily programme. Primary teachers described literacy in terms of discrete skills and genres with achievement being talked of in terms of levels and ratings. Children's involvement with literacy shifted from pursuing their own purpose, to meeting goals for learning as initiated by their teacher.

### **Difference in literacy assessment practices**

Literacy assessment practices differed between the sectors as can be seen in the exhibits presented in the children's stories. Learning Stories were predominantly used for assessment purposes in the early childhood settings, whereas work sample formats were widely used in school assessment, although there was variation in these across settings. Documented assessment in each sector focused on different aspects of learning. In early childhood, assessment was process-focused as it was

contextually bound with an interest in how the child displayed literacy capabilities. In school, assessment was product-focused as it was concerned with identifying specific literacy skills and knowledge.

### **Difference in parent/teacher relationships**

In all three children's stories the relationships between parents and teachers in early childhood and school settings were visible. Parents were seen to be interested in their child's literacy learning experiences and there was evidence of parents' involvement in supporting this at home. I have every belief that all three parents were equally competent and communicative about literacy learning and their own child's capabilities. However, each parent experienced the new teacher-parent relationship, during the transition to school, differently.

The relationship between Ruby's mother and the early childhood teachers was mirrored in the relationship she developed with Ruby's primary teacher. The way that Ruby's primary teacher frequently commented on the amount of parental support Ruby had, indicated that she valued the parent and teacher relationship. Ruby's written story about going to Kaikoura and the teacher comment about Ruby motivated to do the news board provided some indication that she recognized and valued the way Ruby's parent supported her by providing experiences and having conversations at home.

Michelle's mother was visible in both the early childhood and school environments. Prior to school Michelle's mother displayed confidence in her daughter as a competent learner. At school Michelle's mother expressed concern about her daughter's literacy progress. According to the primary teacher Michelle's mother had too high expectations and was being too demanding. She did not consider that Michelle's mother held genuine concerns.

Ash's mother had a long-standing relationship with the early childhood teachers and experienced a significant change when Ash began school. The expectation to be involved in Ash's learning at school was not made explicit in the messages she received from the school during the transition process. The school did not invite children for pre-entry visits and this may have held a subliminal message that parents were also not welcome. The teacher's 'off-handed' interest in Ash's profile book may also have contributed to the parent feeling unvalued. Ash's mother confidently spoke to the early childhood teachers of her concerns about Ash but had not shared this at school, indicating that a relationship had yet to develop.

The three parents in this study appeared to be positioned differently in their relationship with each school. There was a clear relationship between this positioning and their child's experience of continuity of learning. Ruby's mother's visible interest in, and involvement with, her

daughter at school was valued by the teacher. She was viewed as an *involved parent* and Ruby's learning continued. Michelle's mother's interest was interpreted as 'putting pressure' on the school and child while Michelle's learning was interrupted. Her mother was viewed as a *demanding* parent. Ash's mother experienced difficulty finding her place in the school environment. She could be seen as an *uninvited parent* and Ash's learning appeared to stand still.

### **In summary**

Earlier in this report transition to school was described as a period of change that transcends the movement from one community (early childhood) to another (school). The findings in this study propose that each of these children's period of transition differed. Ruby and Michelle appear well established as members of their new community although Michelle's transition to this point took longer than Ruby's. I suggest that Ash had yet to complete his transition as his experience did not describe him as confidently participating in his new environment.

The difference in literacy learning contexts and assessment practices, along with differences in parent/teacher relationships, influenced children's learning continuity in varying ways during the time they moved from early childhood to school. Ruby experienced the least disruption to her literacy learning. She was a competent and motivated literacy learner before school and there was a strong connectedness evident between each environment

she belonged to. Michelle's learning was interrupted as she negotiated her way through the differences in literacy learning context. The assessment practices and change in the relationship between her parent and teacher added to the complexity, leaving Michelle negotiating this pathway on her own. Ash was seen to negotiate his way totally on his own. Not only was the literacy-learning context considerably different, but assessment practices contributed to Ash having a very different identity as a learner at school. The lack of parent-teacher relationship left Ash in a precarious position without the support and scaffolding needed from someone who knew him well.

Previous transition to school research has highlighted the importance of support and scaffolding for children as they make the transition (Dockett & Perry, 2001; Peters, 2000). The findings of this study revealed a variance in the amount of support and scaffolding children receive when negotiating the difference they were experiencing in literacy learning. Where little or no support was evident from either teacher and/or parent, continuity of learning was disrupted.

The difference in parent-teacher relationships may have contributed to the lack of support and scaffolding for Ash and Michelle whose parents were distanced in their relationship with the primary teacher and thus ill equipped to support their child. They did not have the information needed about literacy learning at school to provide such support.

### **Acting on knowledge of the child**

Teachers participating in this study had a unique opportunity to build collaborative relationships between the sectors. They visited each other's settings, participated in conversations around teaching and learning and shared information about children who transitioned between their environments. One teacher comment indicated how this opportunity differed from her previous contact between sectors. "We do school visits to the kindergarten every fortnight... but this was different. Before we didn't really get down to the nitty, gritty." (Transcript 1:p.5)

Participation in this study provided opportunity for primary teachers to gain knowledge of the focus children before they began school in a manner that Timperley et al. (2003) propose is useful.

That sharing information on individual children's skills at the time of transition would allow teachers in school to develop programmes based on children's socio-emotional needs and current skill levels and recognise when children had specific knowledge and skills but were unable to display them in the new setting. (p.37)

The children's stories, as told in chapter four, illustrate how teacher use of prior knowledge of children differed for each child. Developing programmes based on children's socio-emotional needs and current skill levels, as suggested by Timperley et al. (2003), was most visible in Ruby's story. As a very competent literacy learner she fitted well with the school curriculum and her teacher was able to build on what she knew of Ruby's ability.

Ruby's primary teacher revealed that her prior knowledge of Ruby was influential in the expectations she held of her at school. She also revealed that her teaching approach in the classroom involved flexibility and responsiveness to individuals. She talked of approaches to integrating curriculum areas, making learning of interest to the children, and adapting early literacy tasks to the competence of each child. An example of this was in her description of children's first writing books, which differed from those the other primary teachers, used. "Well, often it's halfway through the year when they'd be ready for lines. So I use blank books to start and then I rule the lines, 'cos eventually they have to write" on lines. (Transcript 5:p.16)

The influence of teachers' prior knowledge of Ash and Michelle was less evident. Both children appeared to experience a situation where they were unable to immediately display their prior knowledge and skills in their school settings. I propose that one reason Michelle was unable to do this was because of the shift she experienced in approach to literacy teaching. Her prior achievements involved working in collaboration in an environment where oral literacy was more evident, whereas her new setting required her to work more independently with an emphasis on text-based literacy. Ash's situation differed. His teacher was not a participant in this study so did not have the benefit of the knowledge shared during group meetings. His primary teacher appeared unaware of

the potentially useful information contained in his early childhood profile book and was not seen to actively seek information from the parent. Therefore she was significantly limited in her ability to build on prior knowledge of Ash.

In my analysis I became aware that even when early childhood and primary teachers openly share information about children at the time of transition, this can be insufficient in supporting children's learning continuity. The teachers involved in this project described constraints, or schisms, that interfered with their ability to build on what they knew about children.

### **The emergence of schisms**

Teachers in this study collaborated between sectors to a deeper level than they had done previously. Visiting each other's environments, alongside opportunities to engage in discussion about curriculum and pedagogy, provided a mirror for each sector to view itself in relation to the other. Approaches to assessment and literacy learning, how teachers manage these curriculum responsibilities, and ideas about parent-teacher relationships proved key sector differences that provoked discussion and learning between teachers. Teachers talked of being constrained in teaching by curriculum documents and the expectations they perceived were held within each sector. Division in views about teaching and learning emerged between sectors.



Differences in literacy learning contexts and assessment practices along with differences in the relationship between teacher and parent have been discussed in chapter four as influencing each child's transition. These sector differences attracted ongoing discussion amongst teachers at meetings and are described in this study as schisms or divisions between sectors.

Difference in the literacy-learning context as experienced by the children and discussed by the teachers includes the following schisms:

- teacher practice in relation to building on children's interests or not;
- an emphasis on oral/aural or text based literacy;
- holistic or fragmented learning;
- interdependent to independent learning;
- teacher perspectives about teaching- informal or formal;
- learning driven by child or teacher-initiated goals;
- literacy assessment practices; and
- teacher parent relationships

Difference in literacy assessment practices involved a change in what learning was valued. Assessment was documented and presented differently, and it revealed difference in the aspects of literacy learning that teachers took notice of; the process or the product of learning.

The child's transition to school involved parents developing a new relationship with their child's teacher. The parents in this study each had a different experience of this change and there appeared to be a correlation between the parent experience and the child's learning continuity. Difference in the relationship between parents and teachers could be directly related to the way individual teachers viewed the role of parents in their child's education.

The image or metaphor of crossing a strait between two islands (figure 1) offers a way to understand the influence of schisms between the sectors. Transition to school is like crossing the water between two islands. The strait crossing may be calm or stormy, dependant on the conditions. In relation to transition to school the conditions are determined by the schisms that exist and the influence of these on the child's crossing.



**Exhibit 22. Crossing the strait**

The next section of this report draws on insights from teacher discussion around each of these differences to deepen understanding about why and how schisms between sectors can hinder continuity in children's learning.

### **Schism 1. Building on children's interests or not?**

The ways in which primary teachers respond to prior knowledge of the child and build on children's interests proved to be a contentious issue.

The idea of 'building on the interests of children' proved problematic in the primary environments as illustrated in the following comment:

They [early childhood] definitely go with the children's interest where in the school setting we're probably far more structured because we know we've got to do this, this and this, which unfortunately doesn't always allow us to follow the children's interests. (Transcript 1;p.7)

*This* and *this* referred to aspects of the curriculum and curriculum management. Primary teachers appeared to interpret the idea of building on children's interests as an alternative pedagogical approach that was impractical in the primary environment. When asked where the constraints to this issue came from the primary teachers responded by explaining:

Primary 1 Well I guess you could in your oral language or your writing...

Primary 2 But you (early childhood) told me how you can get down beside an individual child and follow their interest, you can't really do that in the school. Where there's only one teacher. You try to think of the interests as a group, catering for individual interests... it's a bit difficult.

Primary 3 You would like to go this way or another way but you do have curriculum, and you do as far as you can but you have 28 children. How far do you go? (Transcript 1;p.8)

Teachers indicated that the responsibility to 'teach' the curriculum in school restricted their ability to respond to individual children's interests.

High adult-child ratios and curriculum pressures shaped the ways

teachers managed their learning environments. As one teacher commented:

Primary But you're [early childhood] 1 to 8 and we're 1 to 20, and when they [children] come in the 1 to 20 person is basically teaching them the alphabet, to use letters and that. And to me that is a huge thing! They're coming to us with very little and it's the 1 to 20 ratio where you're trying to teach them those things. (Transcript 1:p.15)

The tension between meeting curriculum requirements and having responsibility for a large number of children in the class was viewed as a constraint on teacher ability to follow individual children's interests at school. This view conflicted with the early childhood teachers who talked of being guided by a curriculum where the individual child is positioned as central to building programmes. Ruby, Michelle and Ash were seen to be supported to initiate and follow their own literacy interests in their early childhood centres whereas descriptions of their involvement in learning at school tended to be about times they were participating in predetermined curriculum tasks; ones that teachers set learning goals for.

The difficulties primary teachers expressed in relation to following children's interests indicate that important shifts in practice will need to occur over the course of implementation of the *New Zealand Curriculum* (Ministry of Education, 2007): flexibility and responsiveness. The socio-cultural perspectives inherent in the curriculum call for teachers to pay more attention to knowing the learner in order to teach "in a manner that enables the learner to bring their ways of learning and their knowledge of

and ways with words into the classroom activities” (McNaughton, 2002. pp. 30-31.).

## **Schism 2. Oral/aural or text-based literacy**

The aspects of literacy teaching and learning emphasised in each sector were identified as a sector difference following teacher visits to each other’s environments. Primary teachers noted the amount of literacy visible in the early childhood environments:

Primary There was probably a lot more literacy and numeracy than I first thought. You see all the literacy and numeracy displays around the room so you know they’re working hard on those. (Transcript 1:p.5)

Early childhood teachers described the way that literacy was ‘in your face’ in the new entrant class as they reflected on the amount of text in the environment. An emphasis on written literacy in school was visible where children were seen to independently write stories and participate in shared reading.

While written literacy was evident in both sectors, primary teachers identified an emphasis on oral language in early childhood environments as described in the following two statements made:

Primary 1 I’m just amazed at the conversations the early childhood teachers are able to have with the children. They are fantastic. I just don’t get the chance for that. In fact sometimes I go home wondering whether I have actually talked with a child at all that day. (Meeting notes: 2.08.07)

Primary 2 [referring to an observation in the early childhood environment] So, you can imagine the oral language, great for oral language and the teachers can really get down one-to-one and really talk to the children about what they are doing..... there was lots of talking going on and then the [early childhood] teachers go up and extend, ask the children what they're doing and get them to explain using nice language. (Transcript 1 :p.4)

The emphasis on oral or text-based language was viewed as a key difference between sectors. The move from an environment that emphasised oral language to one that emphasised text-based literacy may have been a factor that interrupted Michelle's learning. Her early childhood teacher had described Michelle's strengths in sharing stories, ideas, thoughts and feelings with others. Her mother had described how she had encouraged conversation in 'real words' with Michelle. This suggested that Michelle's prior to school literacy experience was rich in oral language, which contrasted starkly with her text-based work samples of literacy learning offered from primary. It could be argued that Michelle did not have the opportunity to display her prior literacy competence, as the ways of talking about literacy did not connect with what she was familiar with.

The immediate emphasis on text-based literacy teaching and learning in the first year at primary is questionable. Moving into text-based literacy requires new language and understandings about literacy. Taking time to build on children's oral language while at the same time 'teaching' or introducing children to the language of written literacy may provide a smoother pathway for children. Placing emphasis on oral language at the

time of introducing text-based literacy may require a different teaching approach. Rather than individualizing text based tasks, more emphasis could be placed on learning in a social context where conversation and expressing understandings dominates.

### **Schism 3. Holistic or fragmented learning**

Teachers identified differences between learning environments as a key factor in the sector difference in teaching approaches. The differences were described in terms of space, time and resources. Early childhood programmes were seen to provide children with choice, to be less structured and to be resource rich. Primary programmes were more restrictive, with less child choice and fewer accessible resources. Primary teachers indicated a wish to have environments more like their early childhood colleagues:

..... the spaces! We'd love kindy spaces too. To be able to have the lovely corners around, you know, the learning centers that you have. It's just a dream. (Transcript 1:p.4)

An initial point of similarity identified by teachers in both environments was that of familiar routines in which children could anticipate and predict their day. However, as discussion deepened the difference between a holistic and fragmented curriculum became evident. In school, teaching the skills and knowledge needed for literacy tasks was scheduled into the day as reading or writing time. This was a significant change for children

who had previously experienced literacy learning as an integrated component of curriculum in early childhood.

Primary teachers talked about oral language, numeracy, written language, reading and science as curriculum areas that had regular time-slots in their daily programmes. Routines were framed around these curriculum areas whereas routines in early childhood environments were guided by kai times, group experiences and the beginning and end of the day. Teachers identified aspects of the early childhood programme such as child choice, space and time, as being significantly different in primary programmes due to the curriculum schedule. Primary teachers explained that managing the curriculum to make sure that everything was covered necessitated scheduling the day. One primary teacher described her frustrations with juggling curriculum areas:

Primary            And when you're doing science,..... and sometimes that's restricted because you've got to try and do the different strands of the science curriculum. Within that you could think, well the child has a particular interest and maybe we could fit that into what we're doing, but it just seems as if it is a very crowded day and a crowded curriculum. If we do literacy and numeracy we're doing pretty well aren't we? (Transcript 1:p.8)

In the school environment fragmentation of curriculum areas also became visible through the assessment artifacts, where subject-specific learning was described. Discrete literacy knowledge and skills were the aspects of learning that were identified and documented by the teacher. The influence of this shift on children may have been a factor that affected both Michelle



and Ash. The fragmented nature of their new learning context required them to pursue specific literacy tasks in a manner they had not done before. They took time to adapt to the new and unfamiliar tasks required of them. Ruby, on the other hand, fitted well with the literacy goals in school.

Primary teachers talked about how they looked forward to the flexibility afforded by the *New Zealand Curriculum* (Ministry of Education, 2007). One teacher described how she is finding that she can move away from a fragmented subject approach:

I think the new curriculum tho' has taken us away from the odd and even years [every second year]. Like before the curriculum, as a curriculum leader I had a checker, like we had to do living world, planet earth, and I felt like 'oh my goodness, we haven't done this'. But with the new curriculum when I plan the explanation unit for the junior school I integrate everything. (Transcript 1:p.9)

Primary teachers demonstrated a sense of anticipation in being able to follow different teaching approaches as their schools implement the *New Zealand Curriculum*. There was discussion about the 'old' developmental time and how this may be an approach for the future:

Primary We have been talking about that maybe we could do developmental time and we may focus on a particular thing, like the activities would be fine motor type things. We have talked about that but I guess again, because you've got to do dance and drama, music and art, maths and science, and social studies, all sorts of things. But they could be incorporated in developmental time? (Transcript 1:p.14)

The reservation that teachers expressed was that of meeting accountability requirements. They were unsure whether these ideas would

be looked upon favorably, as one teacher cautioned when the discussion turned to Education Review office visits:

Primary You've got to be able to justify – if you can justify what you're doing and why then you're fine. (Transcript 1:p.11)

#### **Schism 4. Perceptions or views about teaching: formal or informal?**

Difference in the ways in which teachers constructed teaching and learning, their views of what it means to teach, and what learning is valued became apparent in discussion. The dichotomy of in/formal instruction and in/formal learning was explored as teachers grappled with what teaching looked like in each sector.

One primary teacher shared a particularly rewarding experience with children in her class and began to apologise that she was focusing on aspects that “weren’t really teaching”. A comment made to her was “well that’s your problem”. She replied, “what’s my problem?” “That you don’t see that as teaching, but it is teaching!” She gave this some thought before saying, “well it is teaching but it is teaching them routines and things...” (Transcript 3:p.1).

This conversation illuminated how teaching in the primary sector is more likely to be interpreted as direct curriculum instruction. ‘Teaching as instruction’ is visible in the organised and scheduled curriculum periods of the day. These times are when the teacher plans for children’s learning

with specific outcomes in mind and is often referred to as ‘formal’ teaching. The curriculum periods of the day were also times when documented assessment is collected, as was visible in the literacy assessment exhibits of Ruby, Michelle and Ash. This suggests that what is formally taught is the object of most interest as it is formally assessed.

It is interesting to note how early childhood teachers were influenced by learning alongside their primary colleagues in this study. They observed teaching in primary settings and listened to their colleagues talk about literacy and assessment practices. One early childhood teacher spoke of this influence on her practice at the second teacher meeting:

So it confirmed ... the types of things we were working on in our transition programme, letters of the week and words of the week. It was interesting to look at that sort of thing. (Transcript 1:p.12)

In the first few months, teachers from two of the three early childhood centres began to introduce ‘formalised’ small group sessions for children where they focused on ‘teaching’ specific literacy skills and knowledge. This change in practice may indicate that these teachers were insecure in their literacy teaching leaving them vulnerable to the ‘push down effect’ that Hamer and Adams (2002) cautioned the sector about.

Early childhood teachers were questioned by their primary colleagues about whether they provided formal ‘teaching’ times in their programmes or whether they provided direct instruction for children’s literacy learning:

Primary: If they're [children] into their writing and they're forming things incorrectly, would you not say to them well, about o's and that,.... Would you as early childhood say 'that's a really good try but that's not how we do it'. Would you actually correct them?

Early childhood: Yeah, ..... if they want to write their name. We do a lot of messy play and finger painting for the circles, getting the right action for circles, the basics, if they want to form it. We support them, 'it goes up and down' and they just know it, 'over, up and down. (Transcript 5:p.19)

The response from early childhood at the time avoided directly answering the question about correcting the child, appearing to indicate that the instructional view of teaching was not one shared by both sectors. The early childhood teachers seemed unable to adequately explain 'teaching' from their perspective to satisfy the primary teachers' query. The 'informal' context of early childhood teaching appeared to be problematic as, in this context, instructional teaching can be less visible and therefore not readily recognised as teaching.

As time progressed these early childhood teachers were seen to develop confidence in their literacy practices and they began to question themselves about whether the introduction of group times was most appropriate. The early childhood teacher who made the earlier comment about her centre's transition programme described her learning over time at the final meeting:

At the start our group time had a more teacher directed approach, eg. Learning letters, days of the week. We feel we have gone the full circle as we critiqued our methods and teaching. This experience has strengthened our belief in

curriculum as child initiated, [building on] individual strengths and abilities of the children. (Teacher evaluation; Town ELC:2)

The impact of the push down effect, and subsequent return, on the early childhood teachers points to an interesting dilemma in perspectives about teaching. The early childhood teachers did not remain in the formal realm of instructional teaching as seen in action in primary settings. On the other hand, primary teachers were not seen to shift to the informal nature of teaching and learning characteristic of early childhood environments. Difference in perspectives of teaching between the sectors remained. However, it was evident that change in teaching practice had occurred in early childhood. Teachers spoke of more consciously building on informal literacy opportunities in their everyday interactions with children. They had developed confidence in their knowledge of literacy and learnt how to embed this in the pedagogy of the early childhood curriculum. The issue that the early childhood teachers seemed to overcome was about how and when to put their knowledge of literacy teaching and learning to good use. The experiences of these teachers suggest that an informal context can provide opportunity to explicitly teach literacy without necessitating a formal approach.

An aspect of teaching that can be viewed as common in both informal and formal contexts is the intentionality of teaching. The ways that teachers intentionally guide children's learning can make learning explicit. It is of

interest to refer to Michelle's literacy learning prior to school. She was seen to work alongside her early childhood teacher who intentionally supported her to learn to write her name. The context was informal and there were aspects of teaching that could be called instructional (refer Exhibit 9). The teaching or interaction between teacher and child was focused on offering the child what she needed to learn to write her name.

The intentional teaching approach demonstrated by Michelle's teacher was less evident in Ash's early childhood experience. Ash's story (Exhibit 17) is an example of how early childhood teachers can be less than intentional in responding to learning. His teacher chose to make 'quality resources available' for him to attend to writing his name if he wanted to, rather than thinking about how she could intentionally support Ash's emerging ability. Ash's situation is worth thinking about. If his early childhood teachers had engaged in intentional 'literacy talk' - about the order of the letters in his name for example, - would Ash have been better equipped to engage with the literacy practices at school? He may have gained some familiarity with the language of literacy that could have supported him to understand some of the tasks required of him at school.

The decision on when it is appropriate to engage in more instructional type teaching is an interesting dilemma. Currently it would appear that the more accepted view is to begin instruction once the child is at school. However, the three children in this study showed that they were interested and

capable literacy learners prior to school. At what point is it detrimental to children's interest in learning to wait for instruction in order to extend their interest in literacy? This dilemma may be overcome if ideas about 'teaching' are removed from the narrow dichotomy of formal or informal so that teaching can be viewed simply as an intentional act on the part of another party.

The dilemma as to when to engage in intentional instruction may have been in the mind of the primary teacher who questioned early childhood teachers about correcting the child's letter formation. If this child was competently using and forming letters then intentional guidance about letter formation could be appropriate, regardless of whether it occurred in early childhood or primary.

As long as early childhood and primary teachers perceive teaching to be different in each sector, i.e. formal and informal, children will continue to experience an abrupt change in teaching approach when they move to school. If teachers in both sectors adopt a stance of intentional teaching, regardless of the formal or informal context, children could be better supported in their literacy learning by experiencing continuity and familiarity as they move to school. Beginning to read and write could be tailored to individual children rather than begun at the blanket age of five.

**Schism 5. Interdependent or independent learning**

Before beginning school the children were supported in their written literacy interests at home as well as early childhood. In the early childhood environments the children were seen to engage in purposeful literacy tasks alongside others; learning was situated in a social context. There were some common patterns in the strategies early childhood teachers used to support written literacy learning. Children were exposed to different forms and uses of written text as teachers and peers engaged with these in everyday practices. Teachers talked with children about text and wrote text for children to copy as and when opportunity arose. Children's assessment documentation described the teaching and learning context as one where an interdependent relationship existed between learner and others. Achievement or progress was assessed within the social context (in the learning story) rather than being assessed as an outcome, or after the event (as summative assessment).

At school the purpose of written literacy tasks appeared to shift from the child to the teacher as learning specific skills and knowledge underpinned literacy learning intentions. Literacy tasks required children to engage in independent work. The exhibits gathered from schools illustrate this more individualised approach as the formatted work-sheets and assessment formats are designed to assess individual children's literacy progress and competence over time.



Assessment practices appeared to drive literacy teaching and learning in different directions in each sector. Where emphasis was placed on assessing specific aspects of literacy learning the context required more individual learning. Where assessment practices embedded learning in the social context, an interdependent approach to learning was emphasised.

Ruby displayed that she had gained sufficient familiarity with literacy enabling her to successfully engage in independent literacy practice. The influence of the shift from an interdependent to an independent learning context was particularly visible in both Michelle and Ash's experience. Both children were expected to work independently in writing tasks at school whereas their motivation for writing in early childhood and home had been to initiate involvement and work socially with an interested adult and their peers. This may have contributed to the interruptions to learning visible in their stories. At school Michelle and Ash needed to navigate their own way when engaging in independent writing tasks.

Wells (2003) writes about the need to place emphasis on the co-construction of literacy knowledge rather than reliance on either traditional transmission teaching or unstructured discovery learning. He draws on the socio-cultural theoretical perspectives of Vygotsky, a psychologist, and Halliday, a linguist, to discuss the development of the abstract nature of written language and emphasises the need to ensure that children are given

guidance and assistance in carrying out those parts of the activity they are unable to do on their own.

This is most likely to occur when activities are carried out in situations of collaboration with the teacher or other children, in which the new, synoptic mode of construing experience is related to the more familiar, dynamic mode through talk that moves back and forth between the two modes, building bridges between them. (p.45)

This view is relevant to both early childhood and primary sectors as socio-cultural perspectives of teaching and learning underpin both curriculum documents. As implementation of the *New Zealand Curriculum* (Ministry of Education, 2007) takes hold the shift to co-construction of knowledge in the primary sector may well afford children a favourable blend of interdependent and independent learning contexts at school.

### **Schism 6. Child or teacher initiated learning goals**

Changes in purpose and context of literacy learning appeared to interrupt Ash and Michelle's learning continuity. In the early childhood environment literacy learning had occurred within meaningful contexts where the children displayed or initiated an interest in using literacy tools for their own purpose. In school, the purposefulness of literacy tasks was more likely to be established by the teacher who would then attempt to engage children in making it meaningful.

Michelle's primary teacher was very confident in the expectations of her role in relation to meeting curriculum and assessment requirements. She spoke of her involvement in a written literacy professional development project and frequently attributed the ways in which literacy learning was implemented in her classroom to her learning from this project. She shared her approach to assessing written literacy, as can be viewed in Michelle's literacy exhibits 13, and her approach to streaming children for written language according to the different curriculum levels. She had gained an understanding that approaches to assessment included giving the child feedback and making the next learning goal explicit. In exhibit 13, 20.2.08, she does this through her documented comment, "ooh Michelle. You forgot your finger spacing". This work sample was dated at the same time the teacher was discussing her concerns about Michelle's apparent regression; she was no longer finger spacing as she had begun to do at the end of the previous year.

Leaving a space between words is one of the next steps in writing progression. I question whether the introduction of this goal was appropriately timed. The work samples indicated that Michelle was still developing confidence in stringing letters together to form familiar words as she had been doing in early childhood. Perhaps guidance with this task would have been more meaningful. Collaboration with a teacher provides opportunity to build bridges between the familiar and unfamiliar in the child's experiences and understanding.

The ordered approach to literacy teaching and learning may have contributed to the way Michelle experienced a pause in her literacy continuity. She needed to fit into predetermined sequences of teaching, learning and assessment, offering less opportunity for her teacher to respond to her individual capabilities. Michelle's period of 'treading water' may have been an indication that she was experiencing too many new and different approaches to writing from the ones she was familiar with.

While it is not clear what contributed to Michelle's transformation from April, I would like to offer my reflection. Michelle displayed a learning strategy in early childhood that she may well have utilised at school; that of observing for cues. At school, messages about ways of doing things were conveyed not only by the teacher and peers, but also through the paper she wrote stories on. A blank space at the top required an illustration and the lines below required text and the text needed to 'tell' the story represented by the illustration. The time of treading water may have provided her with time to learn about and gain confidence in how things are done around here by watching and reflecting.

### **Schism 7. Process or outcome assessment practices.**

Assessment practices were visibly different between the sectors, which became even more evident in teacher discussion. Primary teachers were well versed in reading and writing achievement levels as they quoted these in their verbal feedback at cluster meetings:

Primary If you look to our ECA data, of the children as they come in. Over thirty of them came in a stanine 1 which is on the score 0 -5. (Transcript 1:p.11)

Primary teachers needed to translate and explain their conversations to early childhood teachers.

Primary sector assessment data clearly illustrated progress in line with early learning achievement criteria that align to the levels of achievement contained in the *New Zealand Curriculum Framework* (1993). This approach to assessment is commonly referred to as criteria-referenced assessment whereas early childhood assessment locates itself with the learner, aimed at enhancing the individual's dispositions toward learning, and referred to as iterative assessment. A key difference in these approaches is that one focuses on actual or outcome learning, what the child knows and can do, whereas the other is interested in potential learning, what learning is beginning to form and what is possible.

Explaining assessment practices to primary teachers was just as important for early childhood teachers. At the beginning of this study the primary teachers all reported that they infrequently receive the child's profile book

when children begin school. Those that had viewed these assessment profile books stated that they found them useful to scan through in order to find out a bit about the children. Sharing early childhood assessment data in the form of learning stories was a significant part of each cluster meeting during this project. Toward the end of the study primary teachers indicated that they more strongly valued these through their discussion about how they now use assessment profiles:

Primary 1 Oh those portfolios coming from the preschools on the children are great! For getting to know about them, not just what their knowledge is, but getting to know what they're like as a person. We make a big thing of them, we show the whole class.

Primary 2 .....and anyone else who comes in.

Primary 3 It's useful for them to feel welcome in the classroom too. It's just one way of introducing them to the class, standing in front of the class, reading out bits about what they've been doing at preschool. And the kids ask them questions. (Transcript 5:p.8)

The teachers demonstrated that, through conversations that explored curriculum practices and unpacked understandings, they had developed respect for, and understanding of, the practices of the other sector. Early childhood profile books became an effective transitional tool for getting to know children.

Sector difference in documented assessment can impede primary teachers' ability to support continuity of children's learning at school when the early childhood material is not familiar to them as a source of assessment

information. The response to Ash's early childhood assessment portfolio at school was an example of this; it was referred to as 'a nice scrapbook'.

Parents also experience the difference in assessment practices and documentation as children move to school. Ruby's mother had daily contact with the classroom teacher and therefore didn't rely on documented assessment to find out about her daughter's learning. Her primary teacher had displayed how she valued social and emotional learning in her class by providing ongoing commentaries of Ruby at cluster meetings that captured social and emotional realms of learning as Ruby developed her position as a member of her new learning environment. This assessment information was largely undocumented. However, the fact that the teacher deemed it important to share suggested that it was learning that she valued and, as such, was probably evident in teacher practices within the class. The fact that Ruby's mother and the teacher engaged in daily informal conversations suggests that this information was also relayed to the mother.

Ash's mother experienced a significant change in the way Ash's learning was documented. Assessment documentation in early childhood involved narrative accounts of Ash's participation and samples of his work. This assessment presented accounts of what Ash was participating in and able to do. At school, formal assessment documentation was presented in a

series of formats where Ash's learning was assessed against achievement criteria. The assessment lens focused on specific components of literacy skills. This assessment made visible what Ash was unable to do. Exhibits 22 & 23 in particular highlight Ash's lack of achievement.

The assessment exhibits from primary school provided limited information about Ash's approach to or engagement with learning . Use of standardised formats and predetermined achievement criteria presented an image of Ash as being needy; a deficit view of learning. Each assessment affirmed the outcome of the first. It was not visible how the teacher may have responded to knowledge of where Ash was at as Ash was not seen to be progressing in his literacy learning. Ash's mother's conversation with the early childhood teacher suggested that she was informed of Ash's lack of progress but not sure about what to do. She seemed to have taken responsibility for Ash's difficulties on herself rather than feeling confident that parent and teacher were sharing this responsibility.

Michelle's mother was very aware of her daughter's progress and recognised when Michelle was experiencing difficulty. The assessment data over February to April reinforced the mother's view. The fact that this parent continually expressed her concerns to the classroom teacher may have indicated that she viewed it as the teacher's responsibility to help her daughter, or, she may have been looking to the teacher for some



guidance to equip herself in this role. The assessment data alone did not provide the information the parent needed.

There is a large gap in the information provided to parents when assessment shifts from a narrative that captures the context of learning, including the relationship between teacher and child and how teachers respond to the child's learning, to diagnostic assessment that documents specific aspects of learning. Teacher practice is invisible to parents in this data. This invisibility could be interpreted as protecting the image of 'teachers as experts'. Over reliance on this form of assessment documentation, as a means of communication between school and parent about the child's learning, may also negatively influence parent involvement in children's learning. If this documentation is the predominant assessment data accessed by parents it is possible that it could contribute to parents viewing themselves as less than competent teachers of their child. The early childhood assessment documentation illustrated in this study can be seen to foster parental support and competence whereas the primary assessment documentation has the potential to undermine this, as in Ash's case.

### **Schism 8. Teacher parent relationships**

Teachers from both sectors talked about the pressure of parental expectations, particularly for literacy learning. Both sectors understood that

parental involvement in children's learning contributed significantly to their child's achievement (Biddulph, 2003). This was evident in statements such as:

Primary: I think what we're trying to get across is that it's a partnership between home and school. Not just my job to teach them to read and write. (Transcript 1:p.15).

Early childhood: The learning community includes parents, 'cos without that preschool wouldn't work. (Transcript 4:p.7)

Teachers from both sectors talked about how they encourage parents to participate in children's learning. In early childhood this was talked about as sharing children's profile books, building informal relationships and providing parent information meetings. It was noted by primary that early childhood settings felt 'homely' and that teachers were seen to have close relationships with not only the child, but the child's family.

In primary, teachers talked of the struggle they face when trying to encourage parents to participate in their child's learning.

I think that as the children get older the parents feel as if they should have less involvement, and often once the children start school they're off to work. We find it very difficult getting parents to come to meetings. We've tried different times of the day, and parent helpers, but it's very difficult. (Transcript 4:p.8)

Teachers shared a belief about how it is important for parents to have confidence in their relationship with the education environment,

particularly at a time of transition when the emotional response of parents can influence that of the child.

Primary: Another thing is too, how parents feel about it [transition].....and how that goes through to the child. (Transcript 3:p.5)

Teachers from both sectors discussed how they valued social learning as a critical foundation for more formal learning and viewed this as a difference that caused tension between teacher and parent expectations. They frequently talked of the need for parents to be involved in supporting the social learning of their child.

Is it more important that the child is socially able to interact with their peers or is it more important from the parent's perspective that they can read a word, write their name, count to ten? (Transcript 3:p.3)

The experiences of the three parents during the children's transition into school provide an opportunity to reflect on how they experienced the teacher's aspirations for parents to be involved. New parent-teacher relationships had to be formed during the children's transition to school. As noted in chapter four the three parents in this study appeared to become positioned differently in their relationship with each school; demanding, uninvited or involved.

*The demanding parent*

Michelle's mother's interest in her daughter's literacy learning indicated that she viewed academic learning as an important goal for Michelle at school. The period of time the mother was voicing concerns about academic achievement coincided with the period of time when the three written work samples (Exhibits 17) illustrated Michelle's limited literacy progress. The mother had shown good knowledge of her daughter as a learner (Exhibit 14) before beginning school and recognised when her daughter was experiencing difficulty at school. The teacher at this time considered Michelle's mother was putting too much pressure on Michelle and that this was the cause of Michelle's regression. She did not enter into conversation with the parent about strategies for supporting Michelle.

The way the teacher responded to the mother's concerns suggests that the parent was viewed as 'not knowledgeable' enough about literacy learning. During one cluster group conversation about children's literacy learning and how parental participation is necessary for their child's success this primary teacher commented, "and you don't have to be a teacher to do this stuff – we're not asking them [parents] to teach." (Transcript 4:p.8). She followed up with clarification "I see parents as cheerleaders, supporters of their child." Within this view the teacher is positioning herself as 'expert'. As a teacher she knew what was best for the child's learning. If this mother was viewed as a partner in her

daughter's learning, teacher and parent may have been able to work together to teach Michelle the skills and strategies she needed to overcome the difficulties she was experiencing. This would have required the teacher to give over some 'teaching' expertise to the parent.

### *The uninvited parent*

Ash's mother's early experiences at school appeared to leave this parent feeling unvalued. The fact that his mother shared her concerns about Ash with the early childhood teacher may indicate that a supportive partnership with school had yet to develop. It appeared that the school had not considered the needs of the parent during the transition process, as Ash's mother had not found her place in a relationship with school. The lack of parent-teacher relationship was identified by the teachers in this project as a major influence on the discontinuity of Ash's learning, as reflected in the following statement:

Early childhood: I think it's about relationships. If that transition had been a reasonably successful one, that relationship would have been there. That teacher would have had strategies, it goes back to there. (Transcript 5:p.5)

### *The involved parent*

Ruby's mother's experience differed from that of Ash's and Michelle's. The relationship with Ruby's mother was valued by Ruby's primary teacher, as evidenced in the teacher's documented comments (Exhibits 9 & 10). She fitted the 'image' of *involved* parent held by the teachers in

this project. She was visibly interested in her child's learning and was seen to be providing experiences and support at home. This type of support aligned with how teachers described parental involvement as "being alongside their kids, doing all sorts of things and talking to them" (Transcript 4:p.8).

### *Positive home-school relationships*

Biddulph et al. (2003) position genuine home/school collaboration as a key factor in lifting children's achievement in the Best Evidence Synthesis (BES) report *The complexity of community and family influences on children's achievement in New Zealand*. In the explanation of this type of collaboration they talk about the need for teachers to be non-judgmental about families and to afford parents respect that is reflected in interactions. "Viewing teachers as professionals and parents as non-professionals is unhelpful. It does not credit parents with the unique and specialist knowledge and understandings they have of their own children" (Lindle & Boyd, cited in Biddulph 2003, p.171). It was difficult to see this level of respect in the teacher-parent interactions in Ash's and Michelle's stories.

Biddulph et al. (ibid) suggest that teachers need to 'reach out' to parents in order to build relationships. In Ash's story there was no evidence of this even though the teacher was seeking to know more about him. In Michelle's story the parent was 'dismissed' as being demanding rather

than being listened to. Developing relationships with parents can be a complex task. As Biddulph alerts us to, “there are no instant recipes for establishing and maintaining positive home-school relationships” (p.164). In the educational context teachers are in the position to initiate the first steps toward this relationship.

Looking at the contrast between Ruby’s mother’s experience and that of Ash’s and Michelle’s provides insight into how critical the initial relationship with school can be in securing ongoing parental involvement in children’s learning. Relationships can be damaged when parents are not viewed as equal partners or when parents do not have opportunity to be included in transitioning practices.

### **In summary**

In this chapter I have suggested that prior knowledge of the child, on its own, is insufficient in ensuring continuity of learning for children as they move from early childhood to school. To enable continuity of learning for children teachers need to use this information to inform the ways in which teaching practices can be responsive to each child’s capabilities and interests. A degree of flexibility in curriculum implementation is necessary for responsive teaching and learning.

Eight schisms or divisions in perspectives about teaching and learning were identified in this chapter and related to the experiences of Ruby,

Michelle and Ash and their parents. The schisms between sectors exist due to teacher beliefs and interpretations of curriculum requirements. I have described the ways in which these differences may have contributed to two of the children experiencing interruptions in the continuity of their learning. Schisms occurred where significant difference between teacher perspectives about teaching and learning was most evident. These were visible in assessment and literacy practices in each sector and in teacher-parent relationships.

*Stormy or calm crossings?*

This study has shown that not all schisms are apparent in each child's transition. However, there was a correlation between continuity of learning during the child's transition and the raft of schisms experienced; where more schisms exist the stormier the crossing for the child.

Through involvement in this project the teachers indicated some transformations in their thinking and, in some cases, their practices. For those in the primary sector however, teacher ability to effect change was impeded by their interpretations of existing curriculum documents, sector focused assumptions about teaching and learning, and the number of children in their classrooms. These teachers look to the future under a revised curriculum to be able to make the shifts in practice that they aspire to; they revealed shimmers of hope.



## Chapter six: Continuity and shimmers of

### hope

#### **Introduction**

This study has explored continuity of literacy learning during transition to school by working with a group of early childhood and primary teachers, and through tracking the lived experiences of children who moved from one teacher in the group to another. By exploring in detail the stories of three children, it has been possible to identify factors that appear to impact on the opportunities for children to continue learning in an uninterrupted manner through the period of transition to school. The factors identified relate to differences in teacher practice between sectors. These practices differ between sectors as a result of a division in teacher beliefs and understandings; there are schisms between the two sectors. When there are wide schisms (greater division in beliefs and practice) a child's transition to school can involve interruptions to continued learning. This chapter discusses implications of the differences identified in teacher practice on continuity of children's learning at the time of transitioning.

This chapter concludes by considering the methodology of the study and points to ways that the issues identified in this thesis might be addressed in order for teachers in both sectors to enhance children's transitions into school.

### **Pedagogical differences**

Teachers in this study grappled with understanding differences in curriculum practices between sectors. Pedagogical differences between sectors, such as practices in relation to assessment and literacy, impeded the ability of teachers to provide curriculum continuity for transitioning children. This study also identified differences in parent-teacher relationships as an influential factor in successful transitions. While teachers looked to the *New Zealand Curriculum* (2007) as providing a way forward, the schisms described in this study continue to impact on children's experiences.

### **Implications for literacy practices**

One teacher made a comment at a cluster meeting; "Transition from speaking to writing is actually huge isn't it?" The 'huge' transition in literacy learning happens at the same time as significant changes in learning contexts. At the time of transition to school children face moving from:

- curriculum that builds on their interests to predetermined learning pathways
- an emphasis on oral to text based literacy;
- holistic to fragmented learning;
- experiencing informal to formal teaching;
- working interdependently to working independently;
- pursuing their own learning goals to those of the teacher;

- process to outcome assessment; and
- a change in the relationship between their parent/s and teacher

The focus children in this study have demonstrated that the transformation from the implicit and collaborative nature of early literacy learning to explicit teaching and independent use of literacy is complex and multifaceted. Circumstances for each child vary according to their prior experiences, capabilities and tendencies toward literacy. Attention to the individual child's interests and motivation during this transformative shift is therefore needed. Support and scaffolding could guide the child to make connections between the familiar and unfamiliar. Teachers in both sectors need to be familiar with each other's practices and pedagogy to be in a confident position to provide the necessary support and scaffolding.

The issues faced during transition, or the period of change, appear to be symptomatic of the current difference in theoretical perspectives about literacy teaching and learning between sectors, alongside notable differences in perceived curriculum expectations.

In this study the early childhood sector was seen to provide environments rich in oral language whereas written or text based literacy practices strengthened over the course of the study. Initially the majority of early childhood teachers introduced formalised approaches to written literacy teaching and learning that appeared to be more in line with the model of

primary school literacy teaching. My experience in early childhood teacher professional learning suggests that early childhood teachers, when challenged about literacy or numeracy teaching and learning, frequently take this approach. A common argument given for this approach is that early childhood teachers believe it is what primary teachers and parents expect. The formalised approach is very visible and easily recognized as literacy teaching and learning by those outside of the early childhood context, whereas describing literacy teaching and learning within the holistic and empowering early childhood curriculum appears to prove problematic. The early childhood teachers in this study had the benefit of ongoing in-depth conversations about early literacy with their primary colleagues. Through these discussions both sectors formed shared understandings about and mutual respect for each other's literacy practices. As a result, the early childhood teachers strengthened their literacy content knowledge and their confidence to respond to individual children's literacy interests within the holistic early childhood curriculum. Intentional written literacy teaching within the informality of the early childhood context became increasingly evident over time.

The perceived focus on outcomes of the *New Zealand Curriculum Framework* (Ministry of Education, 1993) was seen to impede primary teachers' potential to build on individual children's interests and prior experiences in literacy learning. Goals for literacy learning in the primary classroom were likely to be set by the teacher rather than owned by

children. The *New Zealand Curriculum* (Ministry of Education, 2007)

has potential to challenge this embedded pedagogical approach as it signals a fundamental shift in theoretical perspective about learning. The shift to socio-cultural understandings is likely to encourage teachers to place more emphasis on collaborative literacy learning in the early years of school, and to take notice of and respond to children's interests and capabilities by pursuing children's learning goals rather than imposing teacher-oriented ones. As this curriculum is developed within schools, teachers will need opportunities to unpack their ideas about teaching and learning so that the influence of socio-cultural theory will be understood. A sound understanding of socio-cultural theory could increase primary teacher confidence to make the shifts in classroom practice they so desire, as were described in this study.

This study demonstrates the value of collaboration between sectors. It suggests that both the early childhood and primary sectors have a lot to gain from access to this type of professional development. In this study teachers from both sectors were seen to benefit from the socio-cultural approach taken in the study where ongoing contact and facilitated discussion featured as a methodological approach to professional learning. Access to collaborative professional development opportunities that focus on early literacy learning by developing teacher literacy content knowledge and socio-cultural pedagogical understandings, and that offer opportunity to explore implications for practice, could strengthen teaching and learning

in both sectors while also contributing to continuity of learning for children as they transition from one sector to the other.

### **Implications for assessment practices**

The difference between each sector's assessment documentation proved problematic for teachers and parents. At the time of transition to school parents were encouraged to share early childhood assessment material with their child's new teacher. The primary teachers in this study reported that they infrequently received the material. Finding approaches to ensure this assessment material reaches the school continues to be a challenge for teachers in both sectors, although sharing of this material will only prove useful should the recipient understand and value it as more than just a 'scrapbook'.

The difference in assessment documentation between sectors can be attributed to the difference in theoretical perspectives of curriculum documents. Developmental perspectives, as evident in the *New Zealand Curriculum Framework* (Ministry of Education, 1993), focus on predetermined and sequential levels and stages of individual learning. It is important to know where the child is at in order to move them forward, a position primary teachers frequently referred to in this study. Socio-cultural assessment perspectives, as in *Te Whāriki* (Ministry of Education, 2007), look to what the child is potentially capable of in the social context in order to engage, scaffold, and strengthen continued

learning. In both sectors assessment informs teaching, but in different ways and for different purposes.

The socio-cultural perspectives in the *New Zealand Curriculum* (Ministry of Education, 2007) suggest that assessment practices in primary will need to move beyond the predominant focus on outcome learning. Carr (2006) and Peters (2005) advocate the key competencies, as introduced in the *New Zealand Curriculum* (Ministry of Education, 2007), as a natural link between sector curricula. This may offer a way to overcome the abrupt difference in assessment documentation that parents and children experience. If key competency learning is viewed as a continuation of the development of early childhood learning dispositions then familiar assessment practices could operate in both sectors.

It is of interest that the newly introduced key competencies of the *New Zealand Curriculum* (Ministry of Education, 2007) did not feature in teacher conversation about learning in this study. This may have been due to literacy learning being the focus of this study and, if this were the case, it would suggest that teachers viewed key competency learning as social learning that is disconnected from literacy learning. In this study the primary sector did not document this type of learning for assessment purposes, which indicates that it is not given equal attention or value to as literacy learning is.

While formal literacy achievement levels and standards drive assessment in primary it is unlikely that teachers will move quickly to report positively on achievements of children, or link achievement of key competencies to reporting about literacy learning. Such reporting could support parents by setting positive examples of formative assessment that foster collaboration in learning. The current situation overlooks an opportunity to provide a degree of familiarity between sectors through which progression of children's learning could be viewed.

The danger signaled by retaining a high focus on achievement levels or standards in the primary sector is that pressure may turn on the early childhood sector to formalise achievement assessment in order to connect with the primary sector's perception of learning progression. Any such shift would undermine the integrity of the holistic nature of *Te Whāriki* (Ministry of Education, 1996) and fail to address the socio-cultural underpinnings of the *New Zealand Curriculum* (Ministry of Education, 2007).

### **Implications for parent teacher relationships**

This study did not set out to focus on the experiences of parents of transitioning children. However, through the socio-cultural frame for analysis adopted in the research, the position of parents in their relationship with teachers emerged as a factor that has influence on children's learning continuity during transition to school. This study



revealed that there is a connection between the way in which parents are viewed in the educational social context and the continuity of their child's learning.

Parents/whānau should be included in transition to school practices. It is as important for parents/whānau to develop a sense of belonging in the new context as it is for the child. Partnership relationships between teachers and parents are more likely to develop if the parent feels they have a place at school. Teachers and educational contexts have responsibility to initiate reciprocal and responsive relationships with parents/whānau. In some cases this may mean teachers need to build relationships where they are open to different perspectives and view themselves as learners with and from parents/whānau. Parents/whānau would then be more likely to play an active role in their child's education.

### **Changes ahead - The New Zealand Curriculum 2007**

The current period of curriculum change in the primary sector was evident in teacher thinking during this study. Teachers regarded the change as a positive move in education as they could foresee clearer connections in teaching and learning between the early childhood and school curriculum. The practical implications of the *New Zealand Curriculum* (Ministry of Education, 2007) are yet to be realised. These teachers looked to a future where practices within each sector might be more closely aligned as suggested by Peters (2005). "With similar theoretical and practical

approaches to learning and assessment, teachers in both sectors will be able to clearly see the link between learning in early childhood and at school” (p.13).

Early childhood teachers increased their experiential knowledge of the flow on from *Te Whāriki* (Ministry of Education, 1996) to the *New Zealand Curriculum* (Ministry of Education, 2007). They developed confidence to resist and question the pressure of the ‘push down’ effect of curriculum.

Primary teachers looked forward to increased flexibility in managing curriculum. However concerns remain as to whether the curriculum will be sufficient in addressing the schisms around assessment and literacy practices as currently experienced by children. Putting into practice the socio-cultural theoretical underpinnings of the *New Zealand Curriculum* (Ministry of Education, 2007) is likely to prove problematic for primary teachers when significant emphasis remains on achievement levels and demonstrating progress of learning. These teaching practices are firmly embedded in teacher beliefs about teaching and learning as shaped by the *New Zealand Curriculum Framework* (Ministry of Education, 2003) and earlier achievement based curricula. Implementation of the *New Zealand Curriculum* (Ministry of Education, 2007) will require a shift toward thinking holistically about teaching and learning.

### **Methodological considerations**

This study demonstrates the strength of practitioner research in exploring important issues in local contexts, and reveals multiple benefits from bringing different perspectives together. I held multiple roles in this study, that of participant and facilitator in the professional development context and researcher for the study. As a participant I developed relationships with fellow participants while discussing and debating issues. I gained new learning as my own understanding and experience merged with that of other participants. I was not a practitioner teacher as were other participants. I contributed an ‘outsider’ perspective to the experience, understandings and practices of the teacher practitioners in the research. The insights I gained, through participating in the group, assisted my role as researcher as I was able to apply deeper understanding to the analysis of data. The children’s stories and voices of teachers in this study could be told with greater meaning, confidence and authenticity.

The professional development context provided both opportunity for professional growth and a context for researching the issues raised by participants. Teachers engaged in critical reflection where the group shared discussing ideas and the development of new understandings. The development of relationships between participants over a longer time frame built teacher confidence to articulate beliefs and actions to others. Brookfield (1995) describes “the discovery of one’s voice is at the heart of the critically reflective process” (p.47). The findings and implications

raised in this study point to the value of further practitioner research studies where teachers can explore and investigate local solutions as they progress their work within the *New Zealand Curriculum* (Ministry of Education, 2007).

While this study is based on stories of three children and eleven teachers, the implications discussed in this report raise important questions around how teachers support children's transition to school; how early childhood teachers might enhance literacy learning; and how curriculum is interpreted and implemented. The children and families featured in this study were identified as European/Pakeha. This cultural background matched the predominant culture within the participating schools. While this study links difference between early childhood and school as a contributing factor to disruption of learning continuity, difference between family and school culture would add a further layer of complexity to the issue. The need to provide support and scaffolding for children from different cultures to assist them to navigate their way in a new literacy-learning context becomes an even more important factor during transition to school. Teachers would be better able to provide the appropriate support for children and families by investigating children's prior to school literacy experiences before children begin school.

A dilemma I faced during the course of this study involved selecting and retaining the main focus of the study; understanding learning continuity

through teachers' and children's experiences. The range of qualitative data gathered were rich and diverse so that I found I had captured insights that generated further research interest. I needed to put to one side my interest in the ways cross-sector professional development influenced ongoing relationships, change in teacher practice and, ultimately, the ways this might contribute to positive outcomes for children. While the influence of participation in cross-sector professional development on teacher understanding and practice has not been discussed in this study, the data collected is suggestive of worthwhile change. It is a topic of interest for future research and a future story, as evidenced in my experience with these teachers one year later.

The original participants of this study came together for a professional development day one year after the study was completed. The purpose was to focus on items that had emerged from the analysis of this study. Primary and early childhood teachers reported on aspects of their teaching that had changed as a result of their participation in the professional development group. A comment from one primary teacher indicates how significant this change has been to her practice and to the learning experiences of the children; "I was setting them up to fail, sending them home with worksheets that they didn't know what to do with. I don't do that anymore, I haven't heard children say 'I can't do that' for such a long time now."

This study confirms that primary and early childhood teachers benefit from sharing and discussing teacher practice and curriculum in cross-sector forums over a long time frame. The teachers participating in this study developed respectful relationships that have continued beyond the eighteen-month scope of the study. Purposeful and worthwhile change to teacher practice and children's learning experiences occurred as a result.

### **In summary - Curriculum continuity**

This study contributes to a view of learning continuity that is directly influenced by the pedagogy adopted by teachers. Differences between what teachers do, believe in and place emphasis on directly impacts on the degree of learning continuity children experience when they move from one setting to another. Differences in teacher practice create schisms, or gulfs, that can prove problematic as children navigate their way in their new learning context. When these schisms are deeply engrained, the child's continuity of learning can be interrupted or even halted, as described in the stories of the children in this study.

This study points to the need for both early childhood and primary teachers to review assessment and literacy practices to optimise children's development and learning across the two settings. Teachers in early childhood could improve continuity for children through using socio-cultural understandings of early literacy content and pedagogy to

strengthen the literacy guidance they provide for all children. Primary teachers could contribute by increasing flexibility and responsiveness in the early years at school, and by placing greater emphasis on building on the learning that children bring with them at the point of transition into school.

A priority for both sectors is to provide the support and scaffolding each child needs in order to help them make connections between familiar and unfamiliar literacy learning contexts so that they can put prior learning to good use as they continue their learning. At school, priority needs to be placed on building relationships with parents/whānau to recognise parental expertise, and to continue building on and fostering their competence in supporting learning for their children.

The shimmer of hope that lies ahead is that successful implementation of the *New Zealand Curriculum* (Ministry of Education, 2007) will support all children to stand confidently in their identity as young, competent, life-long learners as they transition to school.

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